

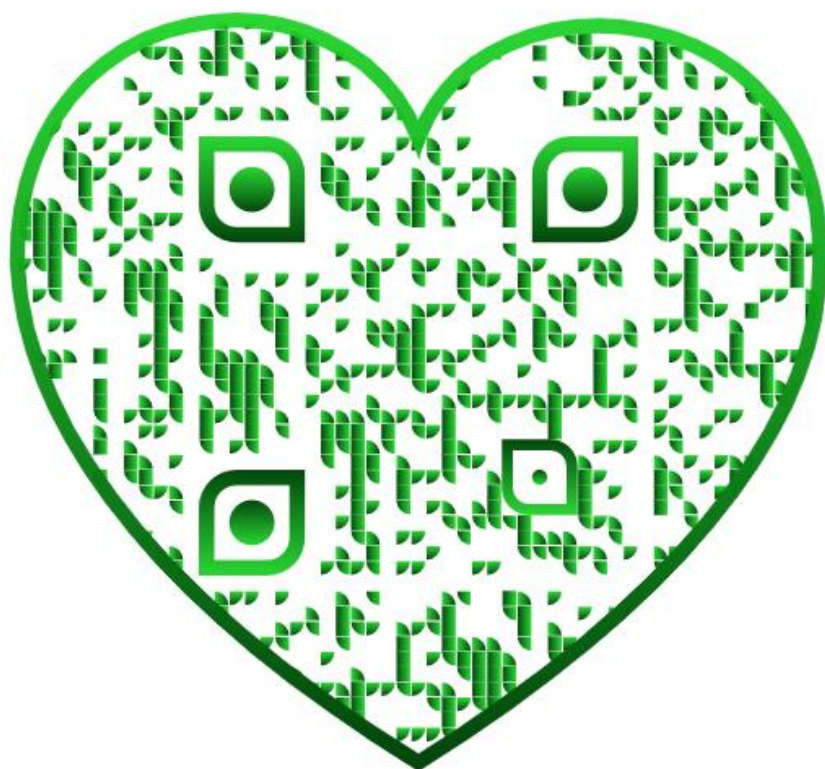


AN
ARCHDEMON'S
DILEMMA:HOW TO
LOVE YOUR
ELF BRIDE

5

FUMINORI TESHIMA

ILL. COMTA





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The more pitiful looking girl was simply trembling, but the one who appeared to be the older sister was shielding her with her body

"I'll never hand this child over!"

"Waaah... Hic..."

AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE



**"...Sorry for
being late."**

It was a familiar
voice. She'd heard
it before, but it was
hard to believe
that the voice felt
so reliable.

**"Now, I shall avenge
my subordinates. Foul
creature, you face the
wrath of Archangel
Chastille Lillqvist!"**

A character in a red hooded cloak with a silver mask and a golden key-like weapon. The character is holding a sword and a key-like weapon. The background is dark and swirling.

**"Ugh, who
are you?!"**

The masked
assallant inclined
their head with a
stiff motion akin to
a tin puppet.

**"Special Enforcement
Squad Thirteen... Azazel.
I'm under direct
command of
the pope."**

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Prologue

“Haaah... Haaah... Haah...” Nephteros ran through the dark forest, gasping for air. Something inhuman was chasing her, making scraping sounds as it ran across the ground. It wore a robe that looked like an old rag, and had several legs and arms sticking out as it crept around like a spider. She didn’t have the slightest idea what it wanted, but it was clearly a chimera.

“Give it up already — Selini Chavliodous!” Nephteros turned around and swung her right arm as she said that, and a rainbow colored crystal blade tore through the ground. And after a while, the crystal blade shot out and skewered her grotesque pursuer without giving it a chance to evade. However, Nephteros didn’t have the leisure to revel in victory. Valuing the time she gained, she began singing her next Celestian spell.

“[Thou art he who rules over terror. Accompanied by the god of war, become he who brings about destruction and chaos.]”

The pursuer still crept toward Nephteros despite the crystals sticking out of its body. Even though the crick and crack of its body splitting apart rang out, it showed no signs of slowing down. And that made perfect sense. After all, if it was an opponent who could be defeated so easily, then a high elf like Nephteros wouldn’t be forced to put up such an unsightly fight. Nephteros cut her own thumb against her canine without interrupting her chant and sprinkled her blood into the air. When she used her blood as a medium, she felt her life being completely sucked away and lost the ability to stand straight. But even so, Nephteros stretched out both her hands and finished her destruction chant.

“[Such is the bell’s toll that crushes the soul] — Phobos Ichos!”

The area around the pursuer’s body distorted as if it was suddenly trapped in a bubble. And immediately following that, the distortion crushed the pursuer’s body, turning it into a bursting lump of meat. After confirming that it had finally stopped moving, Nephteros sank to the floor.

Celestial mysticism wasn’t sorcery. Her humming was a ‘prayer,’ not a chant. Only upon reciting several verses of the ritual prayer would its power manifest. Originally, there was no substitute for the singing. However, if she spent that much time preparing it, her pursuer would have caught up. That was why Nephteros consecrated

her blood to shoulder the burden of the song. The price for such corruption could only be paid for with her own life. Because she used celestial mysticism in quick succession, her heart was beating so fast that it could burst at any moment. And in addition, her vision darkened, making her feel like she was going to lose consciousness.

It hurts. My throat's dry... I can't breathe...

It was no wonder. For the past week, she had been chased by chimeras, and she hadn't been able to get any amount of proper sleep or water. Most sorcerers could continue fighting for an entire day without running out of breath. However, it was unreasonable to do so for a week straight without any sleep, rest, or food.

It's no good. I can't stand...

There was no way that dreadful sorcerer would go easy on her at this point. She had to get even a little further away before it was too late. Mustering her willpower, Nephteros searched through the pouches at her waist. She took out a sheepskin flask, but there wasn't even a drop of water left within it.

"Ah..." Nephteros exclaimed before she collapsed, her silver hair sprawling across the ground. Wheezes began leaking out of her throat, and her golden eyes fell shut. She was just on the verge of losing consciousness.

"Are you alright, lady? Want some water?"

It was a young voice that couldn't be identified as that of a boy or girl. Before she knew it, a small child was peeking in at Nephteros' face. The child was holding a transparent glass filled with water. However, upon looking up at their face, Nephteros' body stiffened.

"Master... Bifrons..."

The one who was standing there, dressed like an innocent child, was none other than one of the thirteen Archdemons, and the sorcerer who also served as Nephteros' master.

"Oh me oh my, why are you so scared? Ahaha."

Nephteros tried to stand up, but she couldn't put any strength into her body, so she was only able to squirm about. Even so, she rolled across the ground to distance herself from the Archdemon. Bifrons, on the other hand, was simply laughing while gazing at Nephteros in a charming manner.

"Fufufu, well aren't you cute... Now then, come back and get some good rest."

Those words were both terrifying and shameless, leaving Nephteros feeling ready to vomit.

"...You have... some nerve..."

"Come on, I'm not really joking here, you know? You're different from all those failures, I swear. You've developed the celestial mysticism that I taught you, and can even use it without the song.

Setting the extent of your power aside, your skill in celestial mysticism far surpasses Nephelia's, even," Bifrons claimed, then smiled without even a hint of ill intent and continued, "So, shall I just forgive you for defying me and running away?"

That was the reason Nephteros was being chased. After learning of the truth at the hidden elven village, Nephteros resolved to run away from Bifrons. And so, using her trembling arm to support her body, she raised her body and glared back at him.

"And? You should at least... know what my... answer is..."

"Well, you sure are stubborn. Still, it's about time that you accept this. I'm getting tired of holding it. Ah, I didn't put any weird drug in it or anything. It's just plain old water, so you can relax."

This was all just a game to this Archdemon. An enjoyable lark that would allow them to see how far Nephteros could get, and just when she would give up. They had no reason to make the chase less fun.

Unfortunately, a single drop of water appeared like a gift from god at this point, so Nephteros timidly stretched out her hand and...

"Whoops, sorry. My hand slipped!" Bifrons said as they spilled the glass of water onto the ground right in front of Nephteros' eyes. However, as she was now, that was quite effective in getting on her nerves.

"Ah..."

Nephteros gasped as she unintentionally opened her eyes wide, taking in the sight of Bifrons' irritating laughter.

"Aahahahaha, sorry. That wasn't on purpose, promise! I'll fetch you a new glass, so don't make such a scary face, okay? Ahahahaha."

This damn devil... Nephteros thought as she glared at him in a minimal show of resistance. Bifrons, however, continued on as if her behavior was quite amusing.

"Hey now. Could you not make such a scary face? I really do think you're cute. That's why I haven't directly raised my hand against you... I won't save you either, though..." Bifrons turned as they said that. And then, the chimera that should have been turned into a lump of meat began squirming about once more.

No way, that can't be...

Nephteros was shocked. The celestial mysticism she fired was the most powerful weapon in her arsenal. Its destructive power may have degraded because she shortened the song, but she didn't have any stronger card to play. In other words, she possessed no means of killing this chimera.

"This 'child' is your opponent. Well, without any ability to think, it's not cute at all, but it at least possesses immortality. I mean, I planted in fragments of the Sludge Demon Lord I picked up from the incident last time, so of course it's this powerful!"

Nephteros felt a wave of dread wash over her as she heard Bifrons' words. The Sludge Demon Lord that Bifrons spoke of was the one that used Nephteros as a core to manifest. After being swallowed by that repulsive mud, she suffocated, and everything down to the inside of her body was tormented. Back then, she even felt the pain of melting away despite being alive. It wasn't something she could so easily forget. And so, Nephteros turned her back to the two monsters, and crawled across the ground to run away.

"Ahahahaa, that's right. That'll do nicely. Well, come back before you get killed, okay?"

Where can I go...? Nephteros ran while covering her ears in an attempt to drown out Bifrons' maniacal laughter.

Before she knew it, the sun had gone down, and the path in front of her had gotten so dark it looked to be connected to the underworld.

Chapter I: It Appears Two People in Love Go on Dates, but What Do You Do on Them?

“...I see. Now this is a dilemma, isn’t it?” Archdemon Zagan let out a bitter voice as he sat atop the throne in his castle. On this day, his countenance looked so grim that a passing child on the street would most likely burst into tears. However, in contrast to his troubled voice, his eyes had a subtle sense of gentleness to them. At a glance, he simply looked to be in a bad mood, but it was actually a gentle expression that confused the inhabitants of his castle. They’d all been making remarks like, “Recently the Archdemon has been grinning a lot.” The sight was unthinkable just a few days ago, so it was no wonder that they were all confused. Plus, that wasn’t the only change. His disorderly hair was just noncommittally evened out with scissors and tied up behind him, but there were visible signs that he at least put in the effort to comb it. Thanks to the recent repairs done to his mantle for him, it looked good as new. For whatever reason, he looked to be paying more attention to his appearance.

Furthermore, there was no garbage to be found anywhere in the castle, and even the carpets and curtains were perfectly straightened out. The place was so neat that one could mistake it for the palace of a regal king. No one would ever believe it was the nearly uninhabited castle from just a few months ago. However, the most frightening aspect was that all the repairs were done personally by Zagan. If someone like his undesirable friend Barbatos were to learn of that fact, they would surely have assumed the world was about to end.

Zagan, who had been acting so strange lately, simply sat around and sighed listlessly. The cause of all the major changes and his distress was one and the same.

What am I supposed to do with Nephy now that she’s my lover...? Zagan thought. He purchased the girl as a slave and began living under the same roof as her a mere four months ago. Since then, he’d gained an adopted daughter in Foll, and even went and greeted Nephy’s mother, yet Zagan and Nephy were only recently able to confirm their love for each other.

Nephy also didn’t seem to be all that calm about the situation. When their eyes met from time to time, the two of them always ended

up averting their gazes. It almost felt like confessing made the distance between them grow.

I can't let this continue! Zagan knew this was all wrong, which was why he thought that he should do something intimate with her. However, he had no idea what to do at all.

“Besides...”

Zagan's consciousness was drawn to his breast pocket as he unintentionally uttered that word. He had a single mithril pendant within it. It was something that was left behind in the hidden elven village as proof of Nephy's connection to her only blood relative, and also something that was stolen from her hands as a baby.

I want to hand this over to Nephy... Zagan didn't really care if there was any meaning to having proof of her relatives now. He just thought that Nephy was the only one who deserved to carry it because the one who left this behind for Nephy loved her. That was why he wanted to return it to Nephy, but it was such an important item that he had trouble finding the right moment to do so. He believed that there was a right time and place to return it, but struggled with finding out when and where that was. And after mulling over it for ages, the conclusion that Zagan reached was...

Since it's so important, I should hand it over right after we do something that only lovers do! If possible, he wanted to hand it over before she met her mother, Archdemon Orias. Zagan believed Orias would likely also be happy about that, since it would make Nephy think of her parent and prepare her heart for their encounter. However, Zagan had already made preparations for Orias' stay at his castle, and he even urged her not to keep him waiting. In other words, he didn't have all that much time to waste.

Ugh, dammit, I shouldn't have told Orias to hurry on over!

However, that was also something Zagan decided himself, so he only had himself to blame. Besides, the real problem was that he had no idea how couples spent their time together.

Holding hands... is just normal, right? Zagan remembered that they naturally joined hands whenever they visited town together. There were times when Zagan would hold her hand, and times when Nephy would lovably grasp Zagan's pinky finger. However, every single time she showed signs of acting spoiled, Zagan felt like fainting in embarrassment. Still, since they were now officially in a relationship, wouldn't it have been fine to take things a little further?

For example... we could share a close embrace or something!

No, that really was far too bold. He had actually embraced Nephy before, but those were at times when he was trying to distract her from her anxieties, or when he saved Nephy the time she was kidnapped. If he were to tell her to embrace him when nothing was

going on, wouldn't she just pull away from him?

It's no good, I don't get it.

Of course, setting aside whether he was a healthy one or not, Zagan was still a young man. He wanted to try kissing those sweet lips on her. He wanted to try fondling her soft breasts. He wanted to try playing around with her pointy ears... Though, now that he thought of it, he had done the last one more than a few times already... In any case, he had a mountain of desires, including his wish for her to speak to him casually for once.

But how do I make any of that happen? If he suddenly made such demands, Zagan would be unable to recover from the feelings of guilt, and he knew of no other way to make things go as he wished.

Maybe I should ask someone for advice... Currently, there were close to thirty people living in Zagan's castle, including the servants. However, the vast majority of them were sorcerers. They were all people who placed sorcery ahead of everything else in their life. There likely didn't exist a more unsuitable group of people to ask about romance.

His daughter, Foll, was still young and didn't seem to have any experience with romance. And frankly, that fact was a blessing, as Zagan would have murdered any man who had approached her in the past. Ex-Archangel Raphael was a man who was a mass of misunderstandings and prejudice in clothing. Other than them, there was also the siren, Selphy, who recently became a servant at the castle, but she was far too chatty to trust with his secret.

In that case, he could try asking someone outside the castle. There was the Maiden of the Sacred Sword, the lone woman among the Archangels, Chastille, who would probably give him the most proper response.

Well, that would actually be rather cruel, though... The person in question seemed to be trying to hide it, but it seemed like she had feelings for Zagan. Though, she also didn't seem to have any intentions of pushing her feelings onto him, so he didn't think it was really something to worry about. However, as long as he knew about her feelings, it would be far too heartless to consult her on his love life with Nephy. And so, he had no one else to turn to. That was why Zagan was making a troubled expression while letting out a sigh. It may have been that he didn't really need to change his behavior. It was just that he wanted to cheer up Nephy in any way possible. And that was because...

"Um... Master Zagan."

Lifting his face up, Zagan spotted a beautiful girl dressed in a maid outfit standing at the entrance to the throne room. Her hair, which went down all the way to her waist, was snow-white, her

pointy ears were quivering in embarrassment, and her eyes were a deep azure like a clear lake. The girl was a high elf, which were a rare commodity among the elves. And as usual, she had a boorish-looking collar around her neck.

He believed that the practically expressionless look on her face seemed awfully soft, easy to understand, and even more charming than before. And, as Zagan made eye contact with that girl, her entire face turned red in an instant and she averted her gaze. Zagan was probably making the exact same expression, so he let his gaze wander around in the air for a while. Eventually, he began fidgeting about as if unable to calm down as he called out to her.

“What’s wrong, Nephy? Did something happen?” Zagan inquired as he awaited Nephy’s reaction. As for Nephy, she drew her slender fingers up to her lips as if biting on them before timidly opened her mouth to speak.

“No, it is not like anything happened. I just so happened to have some free time, so I just...”

So you just wanted to see my face!? Is it that!? Zagan felt like he’d been struck by lightning. Somehow, Nephy had fulfilled his deepest desires without even thinking about it, which set his heart ablaze.

“Um, also...” Nephy shyly muttered.

“Also?”

Did she have something that she wanted? Or perhaps she wished to chat? Or maybe she wished for him to speak in response to her words? Zagan’s heart throbbed from the tension and expectations of what was to come. After a while, Nephy shut her eyes as if mustering her courage before finally continuing.

“I just wanted... to call out your name, Master Zagan.”

Why are you so absurdly cute!? Zagan felt like keeling over when he heard her adorable response.

Looking up, Zagan realized that Nephy was doing her best to gather her courage despite her anxiety. She was likely worried about how Zagan would react. And so, after thinking it over, Zagan beckoned Nephy to him.

“Hear me, Nephy. Don’t just stand in a place like that. Approach me.”

“Yes,” Nephy replied, appearing relieved by his words, and walked up to Zagan at a quick pace. It could have been that she was also waiting to see Zagan’s reaction. Nephy was a meek girl, so Zagan felt like he had to be the one to urge her on in these situations. And as Nephy rushed over, flustered and unable to decide where to stand, Zagan cleared out his throat and called out to her once more.

“Nephy.”

“Yes.”

“You may kneel over here,” Zagan said. Then, he wracked his brain over his foolish words.

Kneel!? Seriously!? Isn't that extremely indecent!?

Nephy's eyes darted about in confusion, but he didn't sense that she would reject him at all. On the contrary, she timidly lowered herself to her knees on the spot.

“L-Like this...?”

It was normal for Zagan to make strange requests, but this was the first time it felt odd to Nephy, so her voice trembled as she responded. Zagan, for his part, was tormented by his sense of guilt, but even so, he returned a bombastic nod.

“Mm. Now you may stick out your hands.”

“Huh...? Like this...? Ah!”

Zagan gripped Nephy's hands as she stuck them out, and pulled her toward him for an embrace. Nephy lost her posture and collapsed into Zagan's lap with both her arms still stretched out.

“Huh...? What?” Nephy ended up embracing Zagan's lap, and let out some bewildered words. Her breasts landed right on him, which left Zagan able to directly sense her heart beating like a hammer. Upon feeling such an unexpected comforting sensation, Zagan was ready to faint from shock. He loved the situation, but it wasn't his original intention, so Zagan endured his excitement and began brushing Nephy's head. And as he did, Nephy gradually slackened the strength in her shoulders, entrusting her body to him.



I suppose this works. Sitting on my lap would be no different from before, after all! Would this count as a variation of the lap pillow? Being embraced in such a manner made Zagan think that maybe he was comforting her, but he was unsure. Just like every other time, he thought he was going about things in the wrong manner, which was why he quietly questioned Nephy.

“So, how do you like this?”

“Um, it’s really... embarrassing.”

I know, right!? Zagan anguished over his failure, but Nephy unexpectedly looked up at him without showing any signs of disliking it. In fact, her expression looked downright happy.

“But... it also puts my heart at ease.”

“I-Is that so?”

Zagan was willing to endure any shame if it meant he could catch a glimpse of Nephy’s happy face. After a while of sitting around like that, Nephy began laughing as if she was ticklish.

“I would like to have you try this, Master Zagan.”

By try this, does she mean it’s okay for me to embrace her lap!? Zagan never thought that she would reciprocate this act, so he stared back at her in wonder. Those were terrifyingly attractive words that made him want to initiate the act immediately, but he endured that urge and clasped onto his armrest.

“I see... That’s a fine suggestion... but there’s no need to rush. Right now, I’m the one spoiling you. You may stay like this for a while longer.”

“...Master Zagan, you really are a little mean after all...” Nephy’s cheeks turned red enough that it felt like a hot wind would blow from it as she said that, but that didn’t deter Zagan’s ministrations. She sounded somewhat unhappy, but her ears happily quivered with a twitch, revealing her true feelings. And after that, Nephy looked up as if checking on Zagan’s expression for some reason.

“Master Zagan.”

“What is it?”

“You noticed... didn’t you?” Nephy asked. Her voice seemed strained, showing not even a hint of the happiness from mere moments ago.

“Nephteros... played with you a whole bunch, right?” Zagan replied while shrugging his shoulders. That was the primary reason Zagan was trying to figure out how to cheer up Nephy. Nephteros had not returned from the hidden elven village with Zagan and the others, and her whereabouts were currently unknown.

They were unable to find her after Zagan and Nephy conveyed their feelings to each other. Nephy’s mysticism and Kimaris’ sense of

smell could not trace her steps, and figuring she wasn't anywhere in the immediate vicinity, they ended up returning to the castle. She was someone who initially approached them as an enemy, but when Nephy was cursed at the hidden elven village and turned into a child, Nephteros spent quite a bit of time with her. It seemed that those memories remained within Nephy, even if they weren't perfectly clear. That was why, even though Nephy looked to be reacting happily, she couldn't help but worry about Nephteros. And honestly, Zagan understood those feelings.

"I don't know what happened, but she sure needs a lot of attention."

Nephy didn't respond to him immediately, her lips trembling as if she was fraught with worry.

"Is it really fine... for me to be the only one who's this happy?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" Zagan tilted his head to the side curiously as he responded, which made Nephy nod in a sad manner.

"I feel like... Nephteros is still suffering. I'm not sure why, but I feel like her feelings are being transmitted to me from time to time..."

"She's a high elf just like you. There may be some kind of bond you two have due to that fact," Zagan answered as he began to stroke her hair more gently.

"Huh...? Master Zagan?" Nephy said, questioning him. She was a smart girl, so she definitely didn't miss the fact that Zagan's tone implied he was trying to dodge the subject.

It's easy enough to guess what that damn Bifrons did to Nephteros...
Zagan and the Archdemon he met the other day, Orias, were exceptions within the Archdemons. Zagan planned on killing all the Archdemons from the very beginning, and Orias was a heretic who ended up obtaining the Sigil of the Archdemon by mistake. If not for them, all Archdemons would be repulsively evil and terrifying. They treated everyone other than them as mere offerings to be used in their experiments.

Bifrons, in particular, was a complete lunatic, but was most likely close to the norm among the Archdemons. If such people were to discover rare creatures like high elves, they would easily exceed the most heinous scenarios Zagan could imagine. That was precisely why he could tell what Bifrons was most likely up to.

"It's not like I don't understand. Honestly, I also feel the desire to save her. However, her happiness is of no concern to me," Zagan said in a manner like he was forsaking Nephteros, then bopped Nephy on the head.

"That's why you need to go and teach her what true happiness is, Nephy. She's hard to please, but not all that stubborn, right?"

"Yes. I will do my best." Nephy responded, her expression finally

brightening up due to Zagan's statement.

"That's the spirit," Zagan replied with a laugh, which made Nephy get off his lap.

"By the way, Master Zagan. It's about time to switch."

Zagan wanted to stay as they were just a little longer, but he'd also enjoyed the situation enough already. Additionally, he was quite interested in the sensation of embracing Nephy's lap. And so, he yielded the throne to her with slight reluctance, when in an unusual turn, Nephy put on a bold smile.

"Now then, by all means, Master Zagan."

"Er..." Zagan groaned.

Now that it's my turn, this feels unexpectedly embarrassing...

However, feeling it would be more awkward to keep Nephy waiting, Zagan timidly entrusted his body to her lap. A sweet scent enveloped him. She was soft, warm, and though he was embarrassed, there was a sense of tranquility spreading through him that he couldn't oppose. As Zagan unintentionally let out a sigh, Nephy tightly embraced him. And as one would expect, even Zagan was left in disarray by the sensation of her breasts suddenly pressing into his head.

"N-Nephy...?"

"Please stay still, Master Zagan," Nephy suddenly pulled out a small wooden stick out as she whispered that to him in an overly serious manner. The tip of the stick was curved like a spoon, so it seemed to be an earpick.

"In return for what you did just now, I'll have you let me clean your ears."

Nephy began cleaning Zagan's ears with all her heart. He didn't know whether this was punishment or a reward, but he was happy nonetheless.



"Lady Chastille, how about taking a little break?"

The three knights who served as her subordinates placed a teacup on Chastille's desk while suggesting that, to which she returned a tired smile. Her red hair was tied to the side as always, but light shadows were spreading out around her scarlet eyes. Since she was fulfilling her duties in the office, she was not wearing Anointed Armor, but was instead in some indigo blue dress clothes. Her stouthearted smile carried a dignified air to it, and even seemed akin to a lone lily blooming in a wasteland.

It was truly gallant, and she carried an air of nobility about her. That was only natural, however, as she was the daughter of a fallen noble household. Plus, as one of the Archangels, she also held the title

of a prelate. In truth, she was the talented daughter of a respectable family, but when it came to her private life, she was a crybaby who knew no restraint.

“Thank you. I’ll be done shortly, so there’s no need to worry. Besides, going on leave of my own accord was the cause of all this in the first place,” Chastille responded. Angelic Knights were soldiers tasked with fighting sorcerers and protecting the populace. Due to that fact, it was a custom for Archangels to take on the duties of a prelate as well. A cardinal served as the head of this town for many years, but just two months ago, he ended up passing away. Therefore, though it was an exception, Chastille was in a position where she served as head of the church in this area. And just a few days ago, she got wrapped up in an incident and left her seat vacant for three days without notice. That was why she was now swamped with the work that had piled up during her absence.

The three knights grimaced as if they found this scene heartbreaking.

“If only there was some way for us to assist to you, Lady Chastille.”

“You three have done more than enough. Didn’t you already get these documents to a point where all I have to do is sign them?”

Having said that, even just skimming over the contents and signing them would take over two days, since there were several hundred of them. And realizing that, Chastille took the teacup filled with a herbal tea in hand and began her break.

They really are attending to my needs. It’s been two... no, three months now, right?

There was an attempt on Chastille’s life after rumors that she was working with Archdemon Zagan spread. At that time, a cup of tea, just like the one she was holding, drove her to the brink of death. The three knights also knew that, which was likely why they poured her a cup of herbal tea that she didn’t normally drink. And after she soundlessly brought the cup to her lips, Chastille let out a relieved sigh.

“Delicious. I can feel my fatigue dissipate.”

“There is no greater praise than that.”

The stuffy men were smiling as if they were gazing upon their beloved daughter. Chastille then casually looked over to the clock hanging on the wall, noticing that it was somehow already noon.

“It’s already this late...? Hm? Now that I think of it, wasn’t a new priest supposed to arrive today?”

It was a grave situation for an Archangel to be carrying the burden of all the church’s affairs, but unfortunately, leaders above the level of archbishops weren’t something that could be transferred so

easily. That was why a priest was to be dispatched as an aide for the time being, but they had yet to show up. The three knights let out an aggravated groan as they realized that.

“For them to be so late on the very day they’re appointed... Do they have no intention of sending over capable personnel!?”

“Come now, don’t be so angry. They may have just gotten lost. It is their first visit to this town, after all.”

Getting lost was something that often happened to Chastille during her private life, so she couldn’t really get angry about it, which was why she tried to deflect and change the subject.

“More importantly, I know nothing about the priest that will be joining us. Do you know who it is?”

She had been grappling with a mountain of paperwork the last few days, so she didn’t have the leisure to check. However, not even looking at the profile of her newly appointed subordinate was still a failure on her part.

The three knights made a complicated expression upon hearing her question. And as she tilted her head to the side, one among them pulled out a single document.

“It’s a therianthrope from Liucaon.”

“By Liucaon... you mean the island country on the other side of the eastern sea, correct? I thought they followed a different religion in that region...” Chastille knit her brows at the unexpected reply.

Nowadays, the entire continent was steeped in the religion of the church, but long ago there were innumerable religions, and it was said that fights between religions often grew so large that they turned into full-blown wars. And over time, they had all merged into one to defeat their common enemy, sorcerers.

Liucaon was an island nation across the sea, so other religions remained markedly more pronounced there. Also, the people of the continent were fully aware that they didn’t really accept other religions.

Plus, that country isn’t really our enemy or ally... There were countless countries on the continent, but because the borders were on land, the true boundary between one country to another was somewhat vague. That was one of the reasons the church held more power than kings. However, since Liucaon was a country isolated by the sea, its borders were clearly defined. Furthermore, it was a national policy for them to close their borders, so their interaction with the continent was sparse.

A mysterious island nation whose culture differed from that of the continent... Yes, that was Liucaon alright. And the fact that her new subordinate was from there worried Chastille. Yet for whatever reason, the three knights returned a tender laugh to her.

“You are certainly knowledgeable as we expected, Lady Chastille. However, the religion in Liucaon is polytheist, and it seems their way of thinking about it is that our church’s god is one amongst all theirs.”

“That’s quite the flexible ideology, then. I’m quite interested in it now...”

The one god revered by the church was the sole absolute existence in the world to them. After all, it was far more convenient for a sole god to declare that all sorcerers were ‘evil.’ However, despite holding the position of an Archangel, Chastille didn’t think of the church’s teachings as absolute. If she was accused of not being pious enough, then she couldn’t fight back, but unfortunately the teachings of the church made it so the adherents left a lot of people to their doom. Chastille felt that it was her duty as one chosen by a Sacred Sword to do everything in her power to save even one more person. That was precisely why she became the head of the Unification Faction within the Church.

Mulling over those thoughts, Chastille looked over to the three knights, who had bitter expressions on their faces. Confused, she stared at them until they eventually began speaking as if resigning themselves to their fate.

“It seems that this priest is a Four Ears.”

“Four Ears...?”

Even though they were all labeled therianthropes, there were many species that divided their race. The most common among them were the dog-like canus or the wolf-like lycan. Chastille’s friend Manuela was an avian. And Zagan’s subordinate Kimaris was a leonin, which was among one of the rarer species that was close to extinction. However, even though they possessed fantastical figures, it was normal for them to only possess two ears. But once in a while, there were those who were born with both the ears of a human and a beast. Even now, it was deeply ingrained in the people that such beings were cursed.

I see... That’s why their attitude toward the newly appointed priest has been so poor... There were people who discriminated against races aside from humans. Naturally, there were believers from the other races, so they were not unjustly persecuted, but when it came to the appointment of positions within the church, humans were given the responsibility of being priests, bishops, and the like. Chastille herself had never heard of any non-humans holding a title beyond priest.

“Quit speaking like that. Think of it this way, the fact that they climbed up to the position of a priest despite that just goes to show how much effort they put in, does it not?” Chastille said as she glared at the three knights.

“F-Forgive our discourtesy!”

The three knights straightened out with a snap and bowed low. They were all rather obstinate and stubborn, but they were definitely not the type of people who couldn't accept change. Their faces looked to say that their eyes had been opened, leaving Chastille with the impression that even if the priest came, they would not be met with disgust.

Still, even these three knights are reacting like this, huh? I have a feeling this is going to get troublesome... Chastille couldn't say much, having not met the person in question herself, but it wasn't hard to imagine the other Angelic Knights and priests having the same reaction.

Well, it'll be nice to not have all these jobs piling up, at least.

Unfortunately, as if to deny her that wish, the newly appointed priest never showed up.



That night, after parting ways with his beloved, Zagan went to the archives of the castle to flip through some old books. They were journals that he brought back from Nephy's hometown, the hidden elven village, records that seemingly stretched back over a thousand years. The books in the already cramped archives were now piling up like mountains.

What Zagan wanted to do most was try something a normal couple would do with Nephy, but his original goal was to destroy all his enemies. He had to in order to guarantee Nephy and Foll a peaceful, carefree life. And there were currently multiple enemies standing in the way of that goal. First was the twelve other Archdemons... although Nephy's mother Orias was no longer on his list. Next came the 'demons' passed down in legends. They were said to have already departed from this world, but Zagan had faced them on multiple occasions already. It also seemed that the Sigil of the Archdemon had a connection to the Demon Lord who once led them. As long as Zagan was an Archdemon, he was surely fated to clash with them, and that was why he needed a means to stand against them. The third enemy was the church... but for now, they weren't much of a threat. He had also gained an ally within them in Chastille, so they weren't an opponent that had to be eliminated right away. Though, he naturally couldn't take them lightly, either.

That being the case, he still required more power. And as Zagan continued to flip through the books, his hand stopped in place. The notes were written using elven letters, and among them were even more peculiar letters... Namely, portions written in Celestian. Zagan was still unable to read all of it, but there were a few recognizable words among them.

“Metatron... Azrael... Is this a list of Sacred Swords?”

There was a very high probability that high elves created the Sacred Swords. He had expected to find information on them among these journals, but he never expected them to be out in the open. He couldn't read the names of the other Sacred Swords, but he could understand everything else that was written. The texts went on to describe how the Sacred Swords were created by high elves in ancient times, and were then handed down to humans. It seemed that on a certain day, the ones who wielded the Sacred Swords visited the village and the villagers were told to cooperate as much as they could. It was also written that elves couldn't use the Sacred Swords, but could somehow amplify their power.

In other words, having elves alongside the Sacred Swords helped them cut down the Demon Lord in the past... It was a little soon to just jump to conclusions, but there was nothing that invalidated the theory. Zagan had gotten absorbed in the book, but halfway through, he felt a sense of discomfort.

“Huh? Is this... a Sacred Sword's name?” Zagan said as he stared at a word written in Celestian. There were two other names he was familiar with, so that was probably the case, but no matter how he looked at it, he couldn't tell. After thinking it over a bit, Zagan set the book aside and clapped his hands.

“Raphael. Are you there?” Zagan asked. And after waiting a few seconds, there was a knock on the door to the archives.

“It's Raphael. You called, my liege?”

“Yeah. Come in,” Zagan replied. And with that, the tall old man walked through the door. He had a terrifying scar carved across his face from his brow to his cheek, and was wearing boorish armor around his left arm. The armor was an artificial limb that he could move thanks to sorcery. A greatsword was hanging down from his waist, and though he had a fiendish glint in his eye that would make the faint of heart pass out, he was wearing a perfectly ironed out tailcoat. This was the ex-Archangel, Raphael, who currently served as Archdemon Zagan's butler. And it seemed he was making preparations for dinner, as he was gripping a ladle in his hand when he entered the archives.

“There's something I'd like to ask you. There are only twelve Sacred Swords, right?”

“Indeed. As far as I know, that is true.”

Zagan folded his arms and nodded at Raphael's words. Upon seeing him make an unusually meek expression, his loyal butler tilted his head to the side in confusion.

“Is something the matter, my liege?”

“I think this is the name of a Sacred Sword, but do you recall

seeing it before?" Zagan opened the book in front of Raphael and showed it to him as he said that. Sure, Raphael was unable to read Celestian, but the name was carved into the blade like an inscription. An Archangel of Raphael's tenure would surely have seen every one of those at least once.

"Let's see. This one is the inscription carved on my Metatron. If we think of these as names, then this one is Chastille's Azrael. This one is Chief Archangel Ginias' Raziel. This one is Michael's Zachariel. This one—" Raphael gazed at the book fixedly, then returned a nod, listing off each of the names until he came to a sudden halt and his eyebrows shot up.

"There are twelve of them. However..."

"Yeah, there's a thirteenth name written here."

The fact that Raphael could read them out proved that they were definitely the names of Sacred Swords. But if that was true, then there was a thirteenth one written there that should not have existed.

"...Hmm. So what do you think?" Zagan inquired.

"You mean whether or not this thirteenth name is a Sacred Sword, right? This is the first I've heard of it as well, but if what's written here is information on the Sacred Swords, then would it not be sufficient proof that there exists a hidden thirteenth sword?"

"But why is there a Sacred Sword that you know nothing about?"

Raphael was unable to immediately reply. And after placing his hand against him temple and ruminating on the matter for a short while, he opened his mouth to speak.

"Let's see. The church possesses a treasury to store the Sacred Swords that have no wielders. And within that treasury, there are pedestals for each of the Sacred Swords. However, there are only twelve pedestals there. Taking that into account, there may be a Sacred Sword outside the church's jurisdiction."

"In other words, the church doesn't know of its existence either?"

"On the surface, at least."

Zagan knit his brows when he heard Raphael's vague answer.

"That is to say, there may be some secrets that even you don't know?"

Even then, Raphael could only groan without finding a real answer.

"My liege. Just as you know, the Church isn't a monolithic organization. Though they are united in their belief against sorcerers, if a Unification Faction like the one Chastille and myself are part of exists, then an Anti-Unification Faction also exists. And among them, I have heard that there exists a faction that should not be."

"A faction that should not be...?"

Raphael paused for a moment, but Zagan could somewhat guess

what the old man was about to say.

“That is to say — a dark side. Though it shames me to say this, it’s true that there have been strange deaths within the Church. Also, I have heard rumors of ‘something’ designated as the Thirteenth.”

Zagan didn’t have any conviction that it referred to a Sacred Sword, but with the name ‘Thirteenth’ it didn’t seem to be unrelated either. And after nodding with a sigh, Raphael gazed at the forest stretching out beyond the window... No, he was looking at the town of Kianoides further away.

“To tell the truth, I did come to this town to invite Chastille to my faction, but my other goal was to look into this. Several Archangels assigned to this town had died here mysteriously, after all. I was hoping to catch a lead with Chastille’s case too.”

But the one to try and kill Chastille was her direct superior, Kianoides’ Cardinal Clavwell. Raphael assassinated Clavwell to protect Chastille, and faked his own death. That was also one of the reasons that he was now serving Zagan.

I see, and since he struck, he lost his chance to chase a trail huh.

Now that Raphael was no longer part of the Church, it was difficult for him to gain information about their inner workings.

In that case, shall I have Chastille dig around it?

Strictly speaking, Chastille wasn’t Zagan’s subordinate, but even so she was a collaborator of his. To an extent, it should have been possible for her to dig into the internal affairs of the Church quite well. The existence of the ‘Thirteenth’ wasn’t something that the Church could ignore after all.

Of course, even though they were all the same organization, there was a certain danger to digging into the dark side of the Church, so he would have Barbatos serve as her escort. There really was no saving that man’s personality, but his ability as a sorcerer was something that even Zagan was unable to mimic. In the off chance that something were to happen, he at least possessed the power to escape with her alive and run over to Zagan.

“Got it. Let’s try relying on Chastille with regards to the ‘Thirteenth.’ She’s somewhat awkward, but when it comes to her professional duties she’s quite talented.”

“Indeed. I share the same opinion. When she stands at the ready as an Archangel, then she truly is a respectable knight.”

Zagan was somewhat astonished that that was the point they agreed on about her and nodded back with a bitter smile.

“However, I’d like to at least know how to read this before it comes to that. Nephy would probably know, so I guess I’ll just ask her later...”

And just then, Zagan realized that a small girl was peeking in at

him from the entrance to the archives.

“Foll? What are you doing over there?”

It was Foll. Just as always, she had her green hair tied in braids along her back, and dragon horns were sticking out behind her ears. The native dress she wore using white and scarlet as basic tones truly suited her. Her amber eyes were wandering about, and she looked to be somewhat fidgety.

“Can I come in?”

It seemed that she understood that they were having a serious conversation, and was wondering whether she was being a bother.

“Yeah. We just about finished our talk here anyways. You may enter.”

Foll pattered along and ran over, then looked up at Zagan.

“Nephteros... didn’t come today?”

Nephteros also played a bunch with Foll alongside Nephy at the hidden elven village. Since Nephy’s memories of the time were hazy, it was possible that it was actually Foll whose emotions were welling up the most with regards to that. And so, Zagan gently brushed his daughter’s head.

“It’s alright. She possesses enough power that she would only be second to me. I don’t know what she’s doing where, but she’ll eventually come back.”

As he informed her of such, Foll stared back at him in surprise.

“Nephteros is that strong?”

“Yeah. Raphael, when that girl came over to the castle, you said she came from the sky right?”

“Indeed. It seems she came to return your mantle my liege, but since you were absent I simply entertained her with tea and sweets.”

“Mm. That’s what’s amazing about Nephteros.” Zagan said as he laughed. “There are those who have broken down my barrier before. That’s because it can be broken by sheer force with the power of dragons or Sacred Swords or the like. However, there have been no sorcerers who could slip through without breaking or rewriting it.”

“Slip through...?”

Foll tilted her head to the side, and Zagan questioned her in return.

“That’s right. Answer me Foll, would you be able to make it all the way to my throne room without breaking a single barrier around the castle and without anyone sensing it?”

“No way.” The young former Archdemon candidate replied immediately.

“Indeed. But Nephteros did just that. I don’t know of any other sorcerers who could do such a thing. I myself questioned whether it was possible no matter how much talent or whatever it was one

possessed or however efficiently they put in great efforts to do so. But she surely did use her talent worthy of admiration to put in just such efforts to the point where her blood would run to do so.”

“...Zagan, you seem happy.”

For some reason, Foll was puffing out her cheeks. It seemed that she wanted him to praise her too.

“Don’t get so angry. As a dragon, you will surely become far stronger than myself or Nephteros.”

“...I’ll do my best.”

As Zagan once more pet his daughter’s head, in an usual turn, Raphael let out a pleasant laugh.

“You seem to be in a good mood, Raphael.”

“Hm? Excuse my discourtesy. I was just thinking that if I had children, I would be able to see such a scene much sooner.”

It was a truly unexpected answer from him.

“It’s not really something to apologize for, but do you not have family?”

“I’m quite old after all. Besides, though it’s unfortunate, I haven’t been fortuitous enough to meet someone whimsical enough to wed me.”

“I see. The world is full of people who lack a discerning eye.”

Raphael stared back in wonder at Zagan upon hearing him say that. And then, he broke into loud laughter.

“Fuhahahaha, as expected, you say things of a different caliber my liege. I have also unexpectedly come to enjoy my livelihood here. Well then, it’s about time I return to my duties so that you don’t drive me out.”

Perhaps in an act of shyness, Raphael hastily turned his back to them. And just as he was about to exit the archives, he came to a stop.

“...Actually, I did have one person I could consider family.”

“Oh? How interesting. Let’s hear it.”

As Zagan pestered him, Raphael spoke in a somewhat uneasy tone.

“It’s not like we were connected by blood or anything though. There was a young girl I picked up in passing and took care of for a while. Thinking back on it now, I believe she may be one that I could call family.”

Raphael’s voice was full of nostalgia. And Zagan averted his gaze over to the window as he muttered.

“I am fully satisfied with your work. Moreover, it is only natural for a job to allow for a leave of absence. It wouldn’t be unthinkable to take just a little bit of time off you know?”

Officially, Raphael was made out to be dead. Zagan was thinking that it was probably better to at least notify his relatives of his safety.

But Raphael shook his head to that suggestion.

"I am a traitor who killed a cardinal. If it is known that I am alive, she will also come under needless suspicion. All is fine as it is."

"...I see."

Raphael then looked over his shoulder.

"However, I am grateful for your consideration, my liege."

Raphael quietly bowed down, and left the archives.

I guess it was none of my business to think that I wanted the two of them to meet.

Zagan had built up a friendly relationship with Kianoides to a certain extent, but sorcerers and the Church were still mutual enemies. If something like an Anti-Unification Faction were to find out about Raphael, it wouldn't be strange for his relative to get involved. However, even so...

I probably... also think of that guy as family.

Zagan didn't even know of the concept called 'family' before meeting Nephy, but nowadays he at least understood that the feelings he had towards his companions would be called just such a thing.

Looks like I have one more thing that I must accomplish huh.

But unexpectedly, this didn't feel bad to Zagan.

After Raphael returned to work, Foll plopped down on Zagan's lap. It was strange for Foll to act this way, but perhaps she wanted to be spoiled. Zagan didn't really feel like getting angry about it either, and he simply pet the small girl's head as he continued ruminating over his thoughts. And as he did, Foll eventually looked up at Zagan's face timidly.

"Zagan. Um, you know what...?"

"What is it?"

She was using a careful tone as if she had some sort of request. But she sank into silence and was unable to continue on.

Looks like it's something important huh.

Zagan didn't urge her on or anything, and waited for his daughter to speak. Foll's shoulder's drooped down as if she were unable to gather her resolve, but eventually looked back up as if she thought of something.

"Oh yeah. Zagan, read this."

Foll held out a thin looking picture book. Zagan took the book and took a look, and inside were many large pictures, so there wasn't all that much writing in it.



Now that I think of it, the brats I grew up around also read this kind of picture book quite a bit.

Zagan was illiterate at the time, so the older kids read them aloud. If he remembered correctly, the title was ‘Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.’

“Hmm. Seems like quite the old picture book.”

The paper felt like it would tear if he put just a little strength into it. The fact that it was still in a state where it could be read surely meant it was treated with care by its owner. Reading it without damaging it may require tenacity. And while being cautious with it, Zagan questioned his daughter.

“Foll. Where did you get this from?”

“Gremory lent it to me. She said to have you read it for me.”

It was extremely unexpected for that granny to be carrying such a thing, but the condition really showed how well she treated it. She possessed quite the strange... no, twisted inclination among the people of the castle, but Gremory was a sorcerer who even had her name included in the list of Archdemon candidates. It was surely simple for her to keep a book like this in brand new condition with her power, yet there were no traces that any sorcery was used. In other words, that granny treated it as something that special. And before he knew it, sweat was forming on Zagan’s brow.

Gaaah! What’s an Archdemon getting all nervous about over a mere picture book!?

Zagan opened the first page of the book with Foll still on his lap.

“Let me say this now, but I’ve never read a picture book for anyone before. Don’t expect me to be good at this alright?”

“Mm. It’s fine as long as you read it for me.”

“Hmph. You sure are able to talk now huh.”

The parent and child laughed as if they were challenging a mighty nemesis, and Zagan then began reading the first page.

“Ummm, let’s see here... ‘Once upon a time, there was a girl who lived with her grandmother in a certain place. The grandmother told the girl to go pick berries in the forest all alone...’ Oi, is this hag sane? It’s suicidal for a brat to venture out into a forest on their own.”

Even Zagan would be worried about sending Foll into the forest on her own. It didn’t matter that she was a dragon, or an ex-Archdemon candidate, nor was it a matter of how much power she possessed. He knew that he had no moral high ground to stand on as a sorcerer, but still, Zagan felt that it was wrong for this old woman to calmly order a small girl, her own grandchild on top of that, to do such a thing. Did she not possess a heart?

“There are probably no monsters or bandits in this forest, Zagan.”

“Even if there are no enemies, couldn’t she get lost or injured?”

“...You’re overprotective.”

His daughter’s words pricked at his chest, but Zagan focused his mind and continued reading.

“While looking for berries in the forest, suddenly, a wolf called out to her. Hey little girl, there’s something far more tasty than those berries...’ Wait, the fact that this guy can speak human language means he’s a pretty strong monster, doesn’t it? This girl’s already dead.”

“Zagan, the story...” Foll sighed upon seeing Zagan cover his face as if he were watching the events unfold before his very eyes. Following that, since Zagan appended his own complaints and commentary every few lines as he continued reading, the story went on at a glacial pace, and they didn’t even finish after a few hours. Nevertheless, just around the time that the story was finally reaching its finale, the young protagonist conveyed her feelings to the knight who accompanied her on her adventure.

It’s like it’s a drawing about myself, so it’s kind of embarrassing... Zagan instinctively began blushing as he finished reading out her confession, and approached the scene were the girl and the knight were blessed by many people as they returned to her hometown.

“In the middle of their journey, the two of them were blessed by all they met, and were treated to countless beautiful clothes, jewels, and feasts that they had never seen before. And each time, they would spill tears of joy.’ Huh? I don’t get it. It’s good for food to be tasty, but how does that bring joy?”

“Zagan, you don’t get it either?”

“Mm. I’ve never experienced it at least. I can’t even imagine that state of mind.”

When Zagan first had Nephy’s home cooking, he was wrapped up in a difficult to describe euphoria. Being given goods of monetary value was also something to be normally thankful for. And having nice clothes gave one less things to worry about. However, could wearing expensive jewels and clothes really move one to tears? Zagan was a bit of a special case, but Foll was also a young dragon who lived in a secluded area. The way normal people acted was something quite foreign to them.

Next, Foll looked to be taken aback.

“Zagan, is this a date?”

Zagan squinted his eyes upon hearing that unfamiliar term.

“A... date...? What’s that? Some type of food?”

He never heard the word before, but it had a similar ring to it as some dessert Nephy had made. And as he tilted his head to the side, Foll put on a meek expression while shaking her head.

“I don’t think so. When a man and woman who become a couple go on dates, they become happy. That’s what Gremory said.”

“...F-Foll, is that true?”

“Yep.”

Zagan groaned. He wanted Gremory to stop teaching his daughter weird things, but she was a good source for all things romance. That granny was strangely passionate about anything related to love after all.

Zagan took another look at the picture book. The couple drawn in the pictures certainly did look to be happy.

“But, which part of this specifically is making them feel happy?”

“Dunno... but, I was also happy when you bought me clothes, Zagan.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Mm.”

He wasn’t Gremory, but seeing someone that he loved become even cuter and more beautiful was something delightful. The same sort of logic could have applied to the one wearing the clothes too. In other words, Zagan felt like this was what would propel his relationship with Nephy to the next level.

“I see. There’s worth in investigating it.”

In the end, research in sorcery was just a repetition of trial and error. If it would bring Nephy happiness, then it would do well for him to research this ‘date’ or whatever it was. Seeing her happy filled Zagan with euphoria as well, after all. And as he came to such a conclusion, he noticed Foll was staring up at him.

“Whoops, sorry about that. I still haven’t finished reading, right?”

“It’s fine. This is fun.”

In the end, Zagan ended up cutting in every now and then, and they somehow managed to get through the whole picture book by the time the sun went down.

“‘And so, the two of them lived happily ever after.’ Hmm... There’s a lot that I don’t really agree with, but it seems all their enemies are gone.”

“Mm. It was interesting...” Foll clapped her hands without changing her expression much, and Zagan let his gaze wander awkwardly as he spoke.

“Wouldn’t it have been better for Nephy to read this for you instead of me?”

Foll at least seemed to have fun, but Zagan didn’t believe he was well suited for telling stories. Such was the case, but Foll shook her head energetically.

“Zagan, it’s better with you.”

“Is that so...?”

“You’re probably the only one who could put so much sentiment into a picture book.”

“Is that... a compliment?”

He had somewhat complicated feelings over it, but his beloved daughter nodded back with a satisfied look on her face. Next, Zagan questioned her about something that was on his mind.

“So, is reading this picture book all you wanted?”

It looked to him like she wanted to say something else in the beginning though... Foll’s shoulders shook with a start, but she nodded without saying anything. She then took the picture book and got down from Zagan’s lap.

“I need to return... Gremory’s picture book. It’s about time for her to get back.”

“Mm... Well, for the time being, tell her she has my thanks too.”

“Got it!” Foll replied as she began running off with a pitter patter. However, she suddenly came to a stop.

“Zagan.”

“What is it?”

“Will you... read for me again?”

It was unusual for Foll to coax him for something like this, so Zagan nodded with a bitter smile.

“I doubt anything good will come out of it, but I don’t mind if you’re fine with it.”

In an even more unusual turn of events, Foll gave him a broad smile.

“Thanks. Daddy.”

Zagan’s eyes shot open, and perhaps because she was embarrassed upon saying it, Foll blushed right to her ears as she ran out of the archives.

Well, I guess I’ll at least pick up a random picture book next time I’m in town.

And on that day, Zagan swore he would practice reading a bit for next time.

Chapter II: When It Comes to a Date, Practice Makes Perfect!

I can't... move anymore... Nephteros' feet finally came to a stop as she leaned against a tree trunk. She had been continuously firing off celestial mysticism every day without any food, water, or rest, so she had passed her limit for healing through sorcery.

She was in a far off place from the forest that Bifrons found her in, but in her desperation to escape, she lost track of where she was. She had passed by open fields and towns a countless number of times on the way, so she didn't even have a clue as to her general location. And all that was left was to be caught by that monster and devoured in an unknown land. The cloudy sky above head that she could see through her hazy vision was gloomy enough that she was fed up with it.

This is the obvious fate of betraying my master, huh...? She didn't regret running away. But even so, she at least wanted someone, anyone to be there with her in the end.

"Haha..." Nephteros chuckled as the first image to immediately float up in her mind was Nephelia's face. She really was an unpleasant woman to show up even at such a time. But still...

She was also... the first one to hold out a hand to me, wasn't she...? Even now, she hated that girl. Now that she knew the 'truth,' Nephteros' feelings were even close to that of a curse. However...

Being alone... is such an unpleasant feeling... The time she spent with Nephelia... No, she didn't really know if it was correct to recognize that little girl at the time as Nephelia, but it was only a few days ago that she spent time with Zagan and the others. It wasn't even all that much time, just a mere three days, yet she yearned to return to those times. And, as Nephteros' consciousness began slipping away, a rustling sound reached her ears.

It finally... caught up... Upon casting her golden eyes toward the sound, what she saw was not the monster that Bifrons set upon her.

"Hey, isn't the one collapsed over there a sorcerer?"

What showed up was a group of knights wearing silver armor. And in their hands were swords inscribed with crests. They were Angelic Knights of the church. Nephteros knew that they were a group who deemed sorcerers 'evil,' and felt that killing them was their purpose in life.

At the very end, I'll be killed by Angelic Knights, huh...? She hated the

idea, but still felt it was far better than being killed by some unthinkable monster. In any case, she didn't even have enough willpower left to glare at them. And so, as if yielding to her drowsiness, Nephteros closed her eyelids...

"Keep it together. Here's some water. Can you drink?"

For some reason, the Angelic Knights didn't bring down their swords. On the contrary, they were holding Nephteros up in an attempt to save her.

"Huh...?" Nephteros was thoroughly bewildered by the inexplicable turn of events as one of the knights held out a flask.

Water...! Nephteros grabbed the flask with her trembling hands, and brought it to her mouth in a hurried fashion. The cold water pouring down her dried throat was accompanied by a burning pain.

"Ugh... Ack..."

Unable to drink properly, she broke into a coughing fit, and the water dribbled down her dark skin. The Angelic Knight then spoke out to comfort her without laughing at her unsightly figure.

"It's alright. Calm down and drink."

And as the pain subsided, Nephteros finally managed to speak.

"Why would... an Angelic Knight...?"

The Angelic Knight looked back at her with a curious expression.

"We are patrolling this forest."

"That's... not what..." Nephteros knew Angelic Knights and sorcerers were supposed to be enemies. And finally realizing what she was trying to say, the Angelic Knight burst into cheerful laughter.

"I know naught of who you are, but we are not such lowlives that we could ignore a woman who has collapsed from injury."

It was a truly unbelievable statement. And while she was left dumbfounded by that statement, another Angelic Knight raised their voice.

"Seems she's significantly weakened. Wouldn't it be better to leave the chatter for later and bring her back to headquarters for treatment?"

"You're right. There are reports of a monster being sighted around here, too..."

Monster... Upon intuiting that this referred to the chimera that was chasing her, Nephteros' eyes shot open. The beast was after her, so it was only obvious that it would be encroaching on this forest.

"All of you, run away... It's... coming."

"Don't worry. We are not so weak as to fall behind a mere—"

The Angelic Knight was suddenly drowned out by a strange voice. Looking toward the voice, they spotted a thicket in the forest being torn apart as a monster with countless number of limbs showed its full figure.

“Ugh, what’s with this repulsive monster!?”

The monster was targeting Nephteros. Faster than the Angelic Knights could get their swords at the ready, it swung its arm as if to crush her and the knights altogether.

“Aargh!”

The arm of the Angelic Knight who was supporting Nephteros snapped like straw, but luckily, he survived. Giving up on drawing his sword, he immediately leaped back while clinging to her. She could tell he was a powerful individual due to his actions. However, he couldn’t fight anymore.

After watching those events unfold, the other Angelic Knights drew their swords and charged in at the monster.

“Richard! Take her and run! Call for reinforcements from headquarters!”

“Ugh... Sorry. I’ll leave this to you!”

The Angelic Knight with a broken arm surely understood that he would just be a hindrance. And so, he lifted Nephteros up, propped her up on his horse, and then straddled it himself.

There’s no way mere Angelic Knights can win against a chimera that has a fragment of the Demon Lord embedded in it.. In just minutes, they’d be reduced to mincemeat. Nevertheless, it was an unexpected source of relief.

If I use these guys as a shield and escape... Even if it was just for a few minutes, if she ran away on a horse, she would buy enough time to regain some of her stamina. And with enough time and stamina, she could gain a means to at least seal that monster. That... should have been the case, but...

“Hey, what are you doing woman!?”

“Just go. I’m the one that thing is chasing,” Nephteros said as she slipped out of the Angelic Knight’s arm and smacked the horse’s rump to get it going. Even she herself didn’t understand why she was casting aside her only means of survival. It may have simply been her desire to not act like Bifrons.

In any case, I’m the only one that needs to be killed by that thing.. That was why she would fight. By the time she got down from the horse, one of the Angelic Knights had already been defeated. They were surely unable to evade the monster’s arms. His arms and legs were stretched out on the ground and he wasn’t even twitching. With the knight on the horse and the defeated knight gone, there were only four of them left, and the monster’s limbs came rushing in on them.

“Selini Chavliodous!” Nephteros put both her hands to the ground and chanted in Celestian, causing a crystal blade to pierce out through the earth. The crystal blade skewered the monster’s limbs as if to protect the Angelic Knights. At the same time, she was struck by

intense wave of dizziness and was no longer able to stand.

I guess there was no way I would recover that much from just a sip of water... Nephteros was already unable to stand, but she still managed to raise her voice.

“All of you, run away! This thing is immortal! You can’t kill it!”

They surely already understood the overwhelming power this monster possessed. And yet, the Angelic Knights gripped their swords once more and faced the monster.

“That won’t do. How many victims will there be if this thing reaches a town? Besides, when the one we wish to protect is standing and fighting, there is no way that we Angelic Knights can run away!”

It was the face of one who was prepared to die.

Why!? Even though I’m letting them get away, you’re... Nephteros knew they didn’t have any chance of winning at all, yet the Angelic Knights stood their ground against the monster. And so, she stretched out her hands to try and save them, but her celestial mysticism would not manifest. Unfortunately, she didn’t have a single scrap of mana left within her. And as she stood there, one more knight fell to the ground after being pierced through the torso.

“Just... run...”

Another Angelic Knight tried to save his skewered comrade by slashing at the monster’s arm, but his blade simply shattered. And in the moment, he froze due to the loss of his weapon and got trampled by the monster’s feet.

“Just listen to me and run away!” Nephteros screamed desperately, but her wish wasn’t reaching them. Despite their losses, the knights didn’t falter and continued swinging their swords.

“Keep it together until reinforcements get here! She will arrive without fail!”

The Angelic Knight who shouted out was blown away by the monster, slammed into a tree trunk, and stopped moving. The remaining knight slipped past the monster’s arm in that moment, and leaped up high above it.

“OOOOOOH! Fall to ruin, you damn monster!”

His sword struck right at the monster’s cranium, but was unable to split it open.

“Damn you! Damn you, damn you, damn yoooooooo! Gaah!”

The monster opened its mouth wide and chomped down on the Angelic Knight, splitting him in two. Tossing aside the defeated knight, the monster finally turned its attention to Nephteros. Her throat had gotten hoarse from screaming, and she was no longer able to sing in Celestian. She glared at the monster in a minimal show of resistance as its grotesque arm came swinging down on her.

“Move!”

The first knight who had been defeated screamed out to her. It seemed he was still able to move despite his wounds, and he thrust Nephteros away from the side. Immediately following that, blood burst out from the spot Nephteros was occupying a mere moment earlier. Nephteros wasn't even able to see the face of the Angelic Knight who saved her.

"Why...?"

If he simply played dead as he was, then he could have gotten away with his life. He should have been able to survive, so just why did he throw his life away? As she pondered the matter, tears wet Nephteros' cheeks.

Wouldn't it have been better... if I was the only one to die...? It would have, so why did those Angelic Knights die trying to save her? And why exactly was it painful to watch people whose names she didn't even know die?

"Just how long... will this keep going on..." Nephteros said, clearly tired. It was fine to die already. She should have already given up, yet the vexing situation frustrated her deeply. She couldn't use celestial mysticism anymore. The same applied to sorcery. She had no power left in her. And so, Nephteros screamed out, unable to understand her own feelings.

"Like I would stand being killed by someone like you! Dumbaaass!" Nephteros screamed, her words echoing fruitlessly within the forest. When faced with that desperate cry, the monster simply opened its huge jaws to devour Nephteros. And as they closed in on her... they were torn apart by light.

"Huh...?" Nephteros let out a befuddled voice as she was gently embraced by someone.

"...Sorry for being late."

It was a familiar voice. She'd heard it before, but it was hard to believe that the voice felt so reliable.

"Now, I shall avenge my subordinates. Foul creature, you face the wrath of Archangel Chastille Lillqvist!"

At some point in time, without knowing where she was running to at all, Nephteros ended up stumbling into the region of Kianoides. And that young girl stood before Nephteros like a hero straight out of a fairy tale. She should have been a wholly unreliable girl, yet Nephteros felt like she had been saved.



Why was Nephteros, who suddenly disappeared at the hidden elven village, here? And how exactly was she driven into a corner despite possessing power that just barely fell behind an Archdemon's? Chastille had a mountain of questions to ask, but the first thing she

did was embrace Nephtheros.

I never thought I'd see this girl cry... She strongly believed that she had to protect this girl. And so, Chastille took a quick survey of her surroundings and bit down on her lip. This was a forest on the outskirts of Kianoides. It was a separate forest from the one Zagan's castle was located in, and didn't have any monsters or dangerous creatures living in it. Merchants and travelers even used it for passage during their travels. Bandits showed up sometimes, but that was why the church had patrols in the area.

And that patrol had encountered a monster. The Angelic Knights who formed a small party of six were all defeated, save for the one who went to get reinforcements. Chastille could tell at a glance that most of them were already dead, too. The one responsible for that seemed to be a synthetic creature created by sorcery rather than a mere monster. It was wearing an old rag for a robe, but it possessed such a large body that everyone present had to look up at it. The robe was unable to conceal the countless number of limbs jutting out of it, but they were not the limbs of a spider, but clearly that of a human.

Its physical repulsiveness spurred on an urge to vomit. But more than that, it filled Chastille with anger, making her blood boil.

"Richard, take care of the girl. Knights of the Azure Sky, follow me. We're bringing down this monster!" Chastille called out to the knights she had brought with her.

"Gladly!"

"Dodge it, Chastille!" Nephtheros let out a sharp cry as the Archangel leaped forward. Chastille looked up, and saw that the monster's head, which should have been split clean in two, had regenerated, and it was gathering a light of its own.

It's trying to fire something!? Even if she were to reflexively jump out of the way, Nephtheros was there right behind her. If Chastille dodged, Nephtheros would die.

Then... I'll just cut it down here! The moment she made that choice, Chastille drew the Sacred Sword from her back.

"Shine — Sacred Sword Azrael!"

Chastille called out its name, which wreathed the Sacred Sword in light. Immediately following that, a ray of mana fired out of the monster's head.

Just like how Raphael's Metatron manipulated flames, Azrael's power was light. The Sacred Sword's light intercepted the monster's ray head on, and bisected it clean in two. And before long, the ray simply vanished, and all that was left was a cold breeze.

Azrael was capable of cutting even light itself. And perhaps having deemed the Sacred Sword as a threat, the monster lowered its body, slammed several of its limbs into the ground, and leaped a good

distance backward. That enormous body, which at a rough estimate seemed to weigh several hundred kilos, fluttered in the air lightly.

Its agility is quite troublesome... No matter how much it looked like a monster, those thin limbs didn't seem capable of supporting its large frame. It was surely using sorcery or some power similar to keep itself upright. In that case, there was a possibility that it was capable of using sorcery as well. It would be disadvantageous to keep it at a distance in that case. And after calmly observing the situation, Chastille barked out orders.

"Knights of the Azure Sky, sever its limbs!"

"By your will!"

The first to charge in was an Angelic Knight wielding a greatshield, Ryan. The monster raised one of its arms overhead, and brought it down to crush him. It looked like a powerless blow, but felt powerful enough that it reminded him of Zagan's fist.

"How impudent!" Ryan caught the blow from the front, and twisted his wrist to avert the blow to the side with a parry. The first strike from the monster ended in vain, and created a sudden opening. Then, Ryan raised his shield back up and rammed into the monster with a shield bash, making it lean back greatly.

"Now! Do it, Torres, Alfred!"

"Aye!" Torres and Alfred were already rushing in behind Ryan with a spear and longsword at the ready. And without allowing the opening made by the monster staggering to pass, they severed its limbs. Not even ten seconds had passed since Chastille let her orders loose, and the monster was rooted to the spot. Back in the day, these three were kicked about by Zagan, but this much was but a trifle to them. It was simply a matter of Zagan being too strong.

"Well done! Let's put an end to this — Azrael!" Chastille gathered light around her Sacred Sword once more and charged in. After bringing her blade straight down at the monster's face and splitting it apart, her blade turned and cut its torso. However, her continuous strikes didn't simply end there. Next was a horizontal cut to the neck, from the shoulder to the torso, from the torso to its legs, and one more flash across its far too enormous body. The only thing a normal person could see was a single flash of light. In an instant, Chastille unleashed several dozen slashes.

"You did it!"

One of the Angelic Knights shouted in joy. However, Chastille's face showed no signs of reveling in victory.

What's with this feedback...? It was like there was no sensation from cutting anything at all. A strike from the all too sharp Sacred Sword would have even been slightly hindered when passing through a sheet of paper. However, she didn't even feel anything like that just

now. That was why Chastille was unsure of their victory.

“Not yet! Don’t let your guard down!” Chastille screamed, and a moment later, countless limbs that were tangled up around the monster’s body shot out. And with a repulsive sound akin to all of its joints snapping, those limbs came rushing in not only at Chastille, but the three knights as well.

“Hrk!”

“Wh-What the!?”

The three knights reacted upon hearing Chastille’s voice and each ward off the attacks with their own abilities. However, that wasn’t true for Chastille, who took the attack at point-blank range.

“Tch...” Chastille sword moved at a blistering pace, but each time she cut one down, the next limb would fly out at her.

I can’t... deal with them all...! The number of attacks exceeded Chastille’s speed even though she was extolled as the fastest among the Archangels. And finally, one of the attacks that she was unable to fend off went straight for her completely open torso.

I’m done for! Chastille thought as her body stiffened...

“Selini Chavliodous...”

A faint, fleeting voice echoed around them. However, her Sacred Sword let out a dazzling light in reaction to that voice, and rainbow-colored crystals burst out from its tip.

What’s this power? It wasn’t the power of the Sacred Sword, that much was certain. Chastille watched as the monster’s arms, which should have caught Chastille, were smashed to bits by the rain of crystals.

“GYAAAAAAAAAAH!”

The monster let out a vile shriek. Then, it distanced itself from Chastille as if it was frightened, and vanished deep into the forest with a repulsive scuttering sound. After verifying that the monster’s presence was completely gone, Chastille finally lowered her sword.

“It ran away... No, it let us go?” Chastille remarked as she turned over to Nephteros.

She saved me, right...? The crystals that shot out of the Sacred Sword closely resembled the celestial mysticism that Nephteros specialized in. However, Chastille didn’t have the opportunity to ask her about it.

“Nephteros!”

The dark elf seemed to have already lost consciousness and collapsed. After sitting Nephteros up in her arms in a fluster, Chastille’s face stiffened.

“What a terrible fever. She’s also completely drained... If we don’t treat her quickly...” Chastille noticed that Nephteros breath was rough and wheezing, and that she had already lost consciousness.

For her to be in such a state... As far as Chastille knew, aside from Archdemons like Zagan, there weren't any sorcerers powerful enough to be considered on Nephteros' level. She prided herself of the mana of a high elf, manipulated celestial mysticism and powerful sorcery, and never showed any mercy. When it came to sheer combat strength, she surely surpassed even Nephy. And yet...

"You three track the chimera... Also, treat the survivors," Chastille called out to the three knights. They were unfortunately short on hands to accommodate for the dead. And without even needing her order to begin taking action, the three knights began treating their collapsed comrades. Ryan and Alfred then stood up.

"Ryan and I shall track the monster!"

His voice was full of ambition, but his expression was bitter. Torres, who was still treating the injured, then let out a worried voice.

"The fresh recruit who never showed up yesterday... and this monster just now... I wonder if they're related..."

Yes. The newly appointed priest that was supposed to show up the other day never did appear. They had asked the church's headquarters about the situation, but had yet to receive a reply. And to reach Kianoides from the church they were dispatched from, one would have to pass through this path.

I don't want to think that they were attacked by this monster, though... Multiple Angelic Knights had already fallen victim to it. She didn't want to think of the possibility of there being even more victims than that. After watching Alfred and the others run off after the monster, Chastille looked down at the shadow at her feet and addressed it.

"Barbatos, you're there, right?"

Her shadow squirmed about after being called out, and an annoyed voice replied to her.

"Huh? The hell you want?"

"Get in touch with Zagan. The monster just now was a chimera. I don't know who the culprit is, but there's no mistaking a sorcerer is involved."

A gloomy face suddenly crept out from the shadow upon hearing her request. As always, he had deep shadows around his eyes. It definitely wasn't a face one would see on someone virtuous. Even so, he was a sorcerer who possessed enough power to once be counted among the Archdemon candidates, and by some chance, he was now acting as a sort of escort for Chastille.

"Listen here, dammit! Zagan told me to protect you, but I don't recall becoming your goddamn servant!" Barbatos glared at Chastille in a dissatisfied manner as he said that.

Well, such was a sorcerer. He was only protecting Chastille because it was Zagan's order and he was being rewarded for it, after

all. There wasn't really anything in it for him, so there was no reason for him to listen to Chastille's requests.

"I'd like to ask this of you anyway. I feel like this is a race against time. I'll do anything you want if it's something I'm capable of, so please..." Chastille lowered her head as she made that pledge, leaving Barbatos staring back at her in wonder.

"Tch, I don't like it... Well, I ain't Zagan, but I guess it's not so bad to have the church owe me one, huh?"

"Thank you. I'm in your debt," Chastille replied with a smile despite the gloomy mood, leaving Barbatos to stare back at her in wonder once more. And again, he clicked his tongue.

"...I really don't like the way you are now."

"Huh...? Did I say something that rubbed you the wrong way?"

Barbatos simply grimaced and remained quiet. Instead, he looked over at the unconscious Nephteros.

"So? It's fine to just tell him about that chimera?"

"Let's see. Please inform him about Nephteros as well. I think it would be best for Zagan to shelter her, but there's the matter of her relationship with Nephy too. For the time being, a simple report should be enough."

Back at the hidden elven village, it looked to her that their relationship had improved, but Nephy was cursed and in the form of a child at the time. She didn't know how it would be now.

Bringing her somewhere that would only increase her anxieties when she's injured like this would also be a bit of a problem... Chastille didn't know how Barbatos took her request, but he shrugged his shoulders.

"Yeah yeah, then I'm off for a— Owowow!"

Just as he began sinking into his shadow, a slender hand grasped his hair.

"Wa...it... Don't... tell him..."

"Nephteros?"

Nephteros had regained consciousness at some point in time, and was speaking in a delirium.

"But..."

"Pl...ease... I don't want her... Nephelia... to see... me..."

"I get it, so let go, dammit!"

Chastille thought Nephteros had opened her heart a during the incident the other day, but it seemed there was still a rift between Nephteros and Nephy. And so, left with no other choice, Chastille called out to Barbatos as he was wailing about.

"Understood. Barbatos, only tell Zagan about the Chimera... So Nephteros, could you maybe let go of him now?"

Unfortunately, Nephteros had lost consciousness while still grasping Barbatos' hair, and it took nearly half an hour to free him

from her grip. At that time, Chastille... no, even Nephteros herself didn't know that even if her life was on the line, Nephteros did not possess enough strength in her body to utilize celestial mysticism.



At the same time, with no means of knowing what was happening on the outskirts of town, Zagan was taking a walk through Kianoides. In an unusual turn of events, neither Nephy nor Foll were with him. He was all alone.

“...Hm? Did something happen?” Zagan muttered to himself. Kianoides belonged to the Angelic Knights, so seeing them quarrel with hoodlums was a daily occurrence. However, today there were several knights with unusually tense expressions running about on horseback. It seemed Zagan wasn't the only one who noticed the unrest in the air from their countenance, as even the citizens were looking on with anxious faces. There didn't seem to be any concrete rumors going about yet, but an unpleasant atmosphere began rippling out like a drop of water on a still lake.

This atmosphere reminds me of the day I met Nephy... Back then, Zagan came to an auction with Barbatos, but at the time there was a case of serial kidnappings targeting young women in town, so the mood was rather terse. Incidentally, Zagan was thought to be the culprit, which made him face much prejudice at the time. However, unlike that time, there was no unjust animosity pointed toward Zagan. Also, the people in town were dressed differently. Four months ago, it was pretty common for people to be wearing clothing with their arms exposed, but now all of them were wearing thick coats, and they even had soft mufflers around their necks and gloves on their hands.

It was about time for the season to change in this area. Zagan also felt a chill on his skin, and used sorcery to raise his temperature. If it got genuinely colder in the area, he could probably set up some burning coals made of mana or spread about familiars to make it all go away. It may have been easier for the townspeople to wrap themselves up in more clothing during the winter, but since it was something that could be handled with sorcery, this was how he got through the winter every year.

Foll is probably fine, but it might be better for me to teach Nephy some sorcery for dealing with the cold... However, even if he was able to fend off the cold, it wasn't like he could do anything about the unsettling atmosphere. Currently, the one managing the church and Angelic Knights in town was Chastille.

“...Well, if it's something that she can't handle on her own, she'll probably say something.”

Chastille had Barbatos with her. In the worst case scenario, he

would at least save her life, and while she was performing her official duties, Chastille wasn't so incompetent that she would be cornered by any ordinary enemy... Though, of course, it was a different matter when it came to her private life.

I guess for the time being, I'll just do what I came to do... Zagan's reason for coming into town was perfectly clear.

"Now then, it seems a date involves walking around town, but where would be best?"

This was a so-called date rehearsal. Thanks to the picture book Foll brought him, Zagan understood that lovers went on dates, but it was still an entirely unknown concept to him. Plus, Nephy also seemed to be totally ignorant of such knowledge. Zagan had to do something about it himself, but he was already confronted with a difficult problem.

Goddammit! The only clothing store I know is Manuela's shop!

Since Zagan didn't know the ins and outs of clothing, he always delegated everything to that friendly clerk, but she would always immediately use Nephy as a dress-up doll. He highly doubted it was an appropriate place for a date.

For the time being, he tried watching what shops men accompanied by women were going to, though the couples sprang up in fear as he looked at them. They would buy fruits at the street stalls, and try out various foods, so Zagan tried buying a tasty looking apple himself.

Well, I guess it might not be so bad to walk around with Nephy while eating apples... And, as he began walking while thinking of such things, Zagan suddenly realized something.

"...There's some kind of dispute going on?"

This was the shopping district, so it was only normal for it to be noisy, but Zagan heard some sort of dispute going on among it all. Even as he took a look around, he couldn't spot anything that looked like a fight. It also seemed like the other people around him didn't notice those voices. He likely picked it up because of his enhanced hearing as a sorcerer. Standing on the spot, Zagan listened carefully to isolate the voices.

"How dare you fucking run." "You sure took up our goddamn time." "Why is this happening?" "Just what did I do?" "Just take them with us." "They'll sell for a lot."

On one side was a deep voice of a man threatening somebody. On the other was a young girl's voice trembling and desperately pleading for something. From the fragmented sentences he heard, he guessed that it was probably a slaver having a dispute with their merchandise.

Now then, what to do... It didn't seem to have anything to do with what the Archangels were doing, so Zagan was troubled. This was

because the slave trade was a proper business here, and because freeing a slave didn't always mean that they would be saved.

To begin with, slaves were sold for money. And as long as they cost money, they had to be in good condition to be sold. At a minimum, they would be given food and clothes and kept in good health until they were sold. A slave's life was guaranteed until they were sold, and the buyer who ended up spending a lot of money on a slave wouldn't treat them as disposable either.

Nephy was a perfect example. Though she didn't put up any resistance when captured, she was properly fed at the time and given beautiful clothes. And while keeping her appearance so well in order, her body wasn't sullied either.

Naturally, this didn't really change the fact that they had no human rights and were made to obey. On top of that, both the sellers and buyers tended to be absolute scum, but at the very least they were able to live. There was a mountain of people who were killed for far more senseless reasons in this world. It was surely better to sell a child than to kill them to reduce the number of mouths to feed. If a slave was released from their position as a slave, they would be able to regain their dignity, but there were also many who would just end up dying.

If Zagan were asked whether slavery was something to abolish, then he would also be left tilting his head to the side, but he also believed that as sorcerers who soaked their hands in sorcery to protect the living, stealing what they wanted and treating the lives of others as something worthless was wrong.

No, wait, if Nephy or Foll were kidnapped, I really would just kill the guy who did it... It wasn't like he suddenly awakened his sense of justice, but that thought was on his mind. And so, Zagan changed the direction he was walking and went toward the voices. It seemed they were having their dispute in a back alley.

After going one block from the shopping district, he found several shady looking paths stretching out before him. Back in his days as a waif, Zagan lived in such places, so it was somewhat nostalgic to him.

"I'll never hand this child over!"

"Waaah... Hic..."

They appeared to be sisters. There were two therianthrope girls crouching on the floor, and several men with the heads of dogs facing off against them. Four canus in total, to be more specific. One of the canus was pinning down his arm, so it seemed they were all getting worked up over the girls resisting them. One of the canus then pulled out a knife.

"You bitch, don't get so fucking cocky!"

"Hey, calm down. This one's a rare breed. If you leave a scar, she

won't be worth much anymore."

"I get that, but come on!"

The injured canus bellowed in anger as another man tried to calm him down. The more pitiful looking girl was simply trembling, but the one who appeared to be the older sister was shielding her with her body. He at least felt like he wanted to lend them a hand.

Huh? What am I supposed to say in this situation...? Zagan had yet to even decide whether he would help them or not, but he no longer even knew how to force his way into the conversation. And, as he pondered over the matter, he watched the canus begin to bark while eating the apple he just bought.

Can these guys just hurry up and make their move... Zagan felt like it wouldn't be unnatural if he stepped in after they started something. However, the sound of an apple being eaten ringing out was far too unnatural in contrast to the growling canus.

"The hell do... you... want...?"

The canus finally noticed that Zagan was there and turned toward him, but all of them instantly froze in place. It seemed that even slavers knew what Zagan looked like.

"What's wrong? Keep going," Zagan simply continued eating his apple and spoke to them as if he was a spectator watching a boring play. He didn't intend to do so, but his voice sounded more dangerous than usual. The canus turned pale and began trembling. Even though their faces were covered in hair, calling them pale wasn't a mere metaphor.

One of them had light brown hair, which was losing its pigment and turning pure white. Another one of them had their hair falling off with a thud. As for the ones that didn't react so drastically, sweat was pouring profusely out of their entire bodies, making their fluffy looking hair cling to their skin as if they were out in an evening shower. And, as they all trembled with a clatter, the canus began begging for their lives.

"Eeek, I-I don't wanna die...!"

"P-Please spare us..."

Umm... Do I look that evil? Zagan knew he didn't have a friendly countenance, but it made him feel a little down that they were so quick to frighten. Or rather, he didn't really think that people who treated others as merchandise had the right to say, 'I don't wanna die.' A villain should boldly die as a villain.

"If you're not going to continue, then get lost. You're in the way," Zagan said as he held his hand to his chin in a bored manner.

"Y-Y-Y-Yes, right away!"

The canus chucked their knives away and ran. The sisters, who were left behind in a daze, then looked blankly up at Zagan.

Hm? Wait, are these two not actually sisters...? Upon closer inspection, the one that he thought was the older sister had cat ears and a cat tail, which made her a tabaxi. The smaller one had large fox ears, a fluffy tail, and appeared to be a vulpin. After looking up at Zagan's face, the vulpin girl shuddered with a start. Well, that was only natural since she'd seen a bunch of armed canus immediately start begging for their lives like that. On the other hand, the tabaxi girl let out a relieved sigh.

"U-Um, thank you very much. You just saved us, right?"

The girl smiled as she said that. She had gorgeous black hair that went down to her neck with triangular ears sticking out at the top. The hair covering her ears was the same color as her hair and looked to be very soft, and there were some strands with a thinner pigment to them on the inner part of her ears. Perhaps because her fear had yet to subside entirely, her ears were trembling about with a twitch.

Her clothes were dirtied, likely as a consequence of being captured by slavers, but had fluttery looking sleeves and hems and used black and red as underlying tones. It looked like some sort of native dress. It was different from the one Foll wore and wasn't something he had seen before. Though she was a tabaxi, it seemed that her human blood ran thicker, since her skin and fingers were the same as those of a human. That made her a cait sith.

She's not timid at all, huh? Upon thinking that, Zagan immediately realized he was wrong.

Wait, could it be that she's blind...? The pupils of the girl's red eyes were completely open, and weren't reflecting anything. It seemed that was why she didn't fear Zagan at all. The vulpin girl next to her was completely pale as she clung to her.

"You're imagining things. I was just passing through," Zagan claimed as he shrugged his shoulders casually. He vaguely had a feeling that he wanted to save them, but in the end, the slavers ran away without him doing anything. It was rather unreasonable to claim he saved them like that.

There was nothing left for Zagan to do here, so as he was about to take his leave, he looked down at the girls' feet. They had boorish looking iron shackles around their ankles. The chains tying them together were severed in the middle, so he could tell that was how they ran away. However, it was plain as day that if he left them as they were, they would just be targeted by another similar group.

That would leave a bad taste in my mouth... Zagan stood before the two girls, and stuck out the half-eaten apple to the vulpin girl.

"Hold this."

Perhaps believing she would be killed if she disobeyed him, the vulpin did just as she was told and took the apple. And with his hand

now free, Zagan tore the shackles off their ankles with sheer force, leaving the two girls staring up at him blankly.

“...Later then.”

Judging that it would look like he was looking for something in return if he did any more for them, he snatched the apple back from the vulpin and tried to stand back up when the cait sith raised her voice in a fluster.

“Ah, please wait... Ooof.”

Even though her shackles were undone, the cait sith fell face first onto the floor. And after getting back up with tears in her eyes, she began groping about looking for something.

“H-Huh? Where did it go?”

Tilting his head to the side, Zagan noticed that there was a long stick on the ground a little further away from the girl.

Ah, a cane. I see... Zagan had heard that the blind relied on canes to sense the area around them. It seemed the smaller girl didn't notice the cane due to her fear. And so, Zagan picked it up.

Hm? This cane is strangely heavy...? Zagan felt it was far too heavy for a dainty cait sith, let alone a blind one. It also seemed quite long, and looked like the staff a monk would use on a pilgrimage. And though he came to a sudden understanding of just what it was, he handed the cane over to the girl.

“Here.”

“Ah, thank you very much!”

The girl accepted the cane with an unexpectedly cheerful voice. And, as she bobbed down with a bow, Zagan spotted it. On the sides of her head, there were human ears that were separate from her cat ones.

She's one of those so-called four ears, huh? It was a species that was rarely born through mixed parentage between humans and therianthropes, or in some cases where a human was cursed to have the shape of a beast. Since it was a type of mutation, sorcerers valued them highly. Not only that, but taking a closer look, she didn't just have one tail, but two. It was a characteristic that Zagan had never seen before. It seemed this was the cause of her abduction.

“I'm Kuroka!”

Now that I think of it, I didn't ever tell them my name... And just as he opened his mouth to name himself...

“How can I ever repay you kindness... HWAAAHH!?”

For some reason, a large amount of water abruptly came crashing down atop the girl as she was bowing her head energetically. Taking a look upward, Zagan noticed that some idiot emptied out a bucket from the second floor of the nearby building. And, as water came dripping down from Kuroka's head, she began trembling.

This is the first time I've seen someone become so helpless... Chastille was quite a wreck herself, but it felt like this girl was a magnet for misfortune. The magnitude of calamity that befell her was different. It didn't seem like there was any sorcery involved, but even Zagan thought that she may have been cursed. The vulpin covered her face like she couldn't handle anything else.

I'm kind of busy today, but... Zagan also couldn't watch anymore, and spoke in a bitter tone.

"...Come with me."



"Fufufuuu! How nice! This child is splendid material!"

The one rubbing her cheek against Kuroka while dancing about wildly was none other than Manuela. The green wings stretching out behind her back were flapping about as she looked up at Zagan, finding herself unable to contain her excitement.

"I can do whatever I want with this child, right!?"

"Huh? Huuuuh!? Whatever you want!? What is this place!?"

She was surely unable to tell what kind of shop they entered, since she was unable to see and all. Kuroka was screaming with a frightened expression on her face.

I guess it would be better to explain this is a clothing shop, but that's kind of a pain, honestly... Zagan wasn't some upstanding gentleman who would pay attention to the worries of someone who wasn't Nephys or Foll. And so, in the end, he simply stayed silent and watched the scene unfold before him.

"Mmfufufuuu, don't you worry one bit. Leave everything to your big sister here!"



Zagan suddenly felt like he was doing something bad, but it was somewhat pitiful to leave her walking around drenched like that.

“Anything’s fine as long as she can walk outside. Do as you like.”

“Mmmhaaa! Isn’t this the first time you’ve been so lavish? You usually get all angry, telling me not to do anything unnecessary!”

“I just picked this one up outside. I don’t have any reason to be so concerned about her,” Zagan said, realizing there was something strange about finding clothes for someone he didn’t care about. Still, he made that cold declaration which made Kuroka go pale as if she’d just been abandoned. Manuela, on the other hand, was all smiles.

“In that case, I’ll give you a discount, so bring over more cuties!”

And with that one-sided declaration, Manuela didn’t even wait for Kuroka’s response as she dragged her to the dressing room. Zagan could hear a sorrowful meow from deep within the shop.

Watching that scene play out, the vulpin girl was clattering and trembling on the spot. Looking at her once more, he could tell that she wasn’t actually a child. It was likely that her species simply had a short stature. Her facial features were, well, they were still on the young side, but the parts that were supposed to stick out were doing so. It appeared like she had more development in that area than someone like Chastille, even...

Having said that, her charming face was convulsing in fear. Well, a villainous looking man who sent slavers running away dragged her along to a fancy clothing shop. It was only normal to think she was going to be sold off somewhere again. It wasn’t like he picked up these girls because he wanted to drive them into a corner, so Zagan held out his half-eaten apple.

“Eat... You both looked far too pitiful, so I simply decided to give her clothes. After she changes, you may go wherever you like.”

Zagan had no intentions of looking after them after this. And as she took in his words, the vulpin girl finally opened her mouth to speak.

“U-Um, I’m... called Kuu. Mister, you’re... um... Lord Zagan... right?”

Mister... For the time being, Zagan was still in his teens, so he felt slightly down over that. Although, it seemed even this child knew of Zagan’s name.

“Yes, that is something people call me.”

“I thought... you would be scarier.”

“If you mean that I’m a villain, then you’re not wrong.”

The vulpin girl, Kuu, finally smiled.

“I at least know... that the real villains... are the ones who claim they’re good people. Those canus earlier... were just like that.”

“Then don’t get caught next time.”

“I won’t!”

And while they were making idle chatter, Manuela returned.

“Fuhahahaa, how’s this, Zagan?”

Kuroka, who got dragged back, was practically only wearing underwear. Her navel was completely exposed, and though she had some sort of elastic cloth hanging from her neck to her chest, it only covered half of her top and bits were sticking out. She had panties on that looked ready to fall right off with a tug of a string, and a transparent loincloth that made her buttocks plainly visible. She seemed to be quite slender when he first saw her, but she was clearly more shapely than he’d imagined.

I see. If Nephy were to wear something like... No no no, this is no good... Zagan did kind of want to see it, but he couldn’t make her wear such a thing even within the privacy of the castle.

“I don’t mind if you make her your toy, but at least prepare some proper clothes,” Zagan said as he shot an uninterested looking glance over at Manuela.

“It’s alright! I’ll eventually pick out something proper when I’m done!”

“Wh-What do you mean when you’re done? What exactly am I wearing right now!?”

“Now now, let’s go try on the next outfit!”

“Meooooooooow!?”

After being thoroughly toyed with by Manuela, Kuroka was finally dressed in clothes that were similar to the native attire she was originally wearing.

“Haaah... Girls from Liucaon have such springy skin. It’s so nice.”

“Hic...”

Manuela let out a satisfied sigh, but the caith girl was on the verge of tears. In any case, it seemed that Manuela was fully satisfied, so Zagan also stood up.

“You have my thanks. How much is it?”

“Let’s see. Then, how about this much?” Manuela proposed an amount that was less than half the market value. The fact that she was signifying the value using her fingers instead of saying it aloud was likely out of consideration for the girls.

“...Are you fine with that price?”

“Well, you let me have fun, so why not? If I don’t give you a lil’ discount, then you won’t come back, right? A merchant always balances their trade.”

Taking a look at Kuroka, Zagan felt like it didn’t really balance it out...

After finishing with the payment, Kuroka finally came to her

senses and began touching her clothes to check them out.

“Um, these are clothes you picked out for me, right? I’ll at least pay for them!”

“...No, I mean, aren’t you penniless?”

“Huh...?”

There was no way she was caught by slavers and didn’t have all her possessions snatched from her. Her clothes were one thing, but it was clear as day that they took everything else aside from her cane.

“AAAH! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What do I do!? I have to go to my new posting, but my letter of introduction is also gooooooone!” Kuroka turned pale and covered her face due to that revelation.

“Posting?”

She likely meant a job or something. He didn’t know what kind of work she did, but ‘posting’ wasn’t a phrase he really heard much. Kuroka seemed to be a foreigner, so it was likely just a matter of dialect. And while Zagan tilted his head over that, Kuroka began wailing in grief.

“I-I came to this town for work, but I lost my letter of introduction... Actually, I’m already a whole day late... Aaah, what do I do...?”

It seemed the girls had been captured over a day ago. Now that he thought of it, he never asked what kind of relationship they had, but it was probably correct to say they were caught and ran away together because they were similar.

“I-It’ll be fine, I think...” Kuu was also trying to comfort her, but Kuroka was crestfallen.

“I don’t know your circumstances, but how about asking the church for shelter? After Chastille took over, the donations got cheaper, and if you got caught in some incident, then you could go testify to them,” Manuela called out to her, seemingly unable to watch anymore.

Zagan was reminded that Chastille took the place of the old bishop upon hearing that. There was a side of the church that acted as a sort of refuge shelter for those attacked by sorcerers and bandits. That was why people paid the expensive donations despite complaining about them. And yet, Kuroka’s shoulders drooped down and her face clouded over.

“I’m supposed to be working at that church, yet this kind of thing happened... I can’t possibly show my face to the bishops.”

Hm? Then... were those Angelic Knights running about looking for this girl? Zagan didn’t think that she was all that important, but considering Chastille’s personality, he felt like she would put all her forces to work to search for a missing nun.

You know, I’d really like to get my business done here and go back to

the castle... It was about time for Nephy and the others to start preparing dinner. He missed his chance to invite her out on a date because of the girls. He was annoyed by the whole situation, so Zagan grabbed Kuroka by the nape of her neck and lifted her up.

“Eeek?”

Ignoring her scream, Zagan looked over to Kuu.

“I’m just going to toss this one into the church, but what will you do?”

“U-Um...”

“...Do you have a home to go back to?”

Kuu shook her head in dismay.

“Then come with me. The church will at least give you a place to sleep.”

With that, Zagan began walking at a brisk pace as Kuu tagged along in a panic.

“Thanks for your continued business! Next time, bring Nephy and Foll over too!”

Sadly, the two girls were only able to shudder upon hearing Manuela send them off.



“U-Um, I can walk on my own, so please let me down!” Kuroka seemed on the verge of tears as Zagan was quite literally carrying her like a cat by the nape of her neck. Incidentally, she was carrying her own cane.

“I’m busy here. Don’t have time to look after you two all day,” Zagan heartlessly refused her request.

In that case it would have been fine to just abandon them, but for some reason that choice never came to Zagan’s mind. Eventually, he noticed that Kuu wasn’t able to keep pace behind him, which made sense considering the difference in stride between an adult and a child. As Zagan came to a stop, he scooped up the vulpin girl in his other arm. Kuu didn’t raise her voice and simply looked up at Zagan in surprise. And perhaps having sensed that, Kuroka let out some gentle words.

“You sure are kind, Mister.”

“You’re just imagining things.”

“Fufufu... Somehow, that part of you is just like my father.”

“How unfortunate for you.”

If he resembled Zagan, then there was no way he was a decent man. However, Kuroka’s expression definitely didn’t make it seem like she was looking back on unpleasant memories.

“Hey, Mister, I want to pay you back somehow.”

“There’s no need.”

“Please!”

He didn’t know what she was wanted to do, but Kuroka’s expression was desperate.

Now that I think of it, this one’s still a woman, right? If there was something that Zagan didn’t know as a man, then her perspective could have proved useful.

“Then, answer a question for me. What would make a woman happy?”

Both Kuroka and Kuu stiffened up, left wide-eyed in shock.

“U-Um, Mister, are you talking about... your girlfriend?”

“...Well, I don’t mind if you think that.”

They had properly conveyed their feelings to each other, but they still hadn’t done anything that a real couple would do. It was still difficult for Zagan to boldly claim that they were together due to that sad fact.

“Oh I know! Getting food makes you happy, right?” Kuu offered her suggestion nearly immediately.

“...Well, you’re right there.”

However, honestly speaking, Nephy’s cooking was the best food there was to him. He didn’t feel like he could give her anything nearly as delicious, so that seemed pointless. Besides, if they were to go on a date, they would most likely eat at a restaurant while taking a break at some point anyway. And so, he felt like it wasn’t a good enough main event.

“Well, I think she’ll be happy if you give her a gift. When I got this cane from my father, I was super happy,” Kuroka chimed in with her opinion as Zagan groaned in dissatisfaction.

“Hmm. A gift, huh...?” Zagan had bought clothes for Nephy quite frequently, but Nephy’s everyday attire was the blue one piece dress and apron. Buying her some cute clothes was a good choice.

The danger of that damn Manuela using her like a toy is worrying, though... Still, as long as he was able to clear that hurdle, it wasn’t a bad suggestion.

“That’s a good idea. You have my thanks.”

“I’m glad I was able to help.”

Setting that aside, Zagan was a sorcerer. And thanks to the superhuman physical abilities that status provided him, the church was now already in sight. At some point in time, Kuroka had gone completely limp, but it wasn’t much of a problem.

The church’s base in Kianoides was located in an old cathedral. It had towering doors, and if one were to include its central spire, it was larger than Zagan’s castle. There were also stone statues modeled after the Angelic Knights lined up along its stone walls, making it a building that signified the wealth and power of the church. And after knocking

on its door, Zagan knit his brows.

This smell is... blood? It wasn't a pronounced scent, so no one should have died, but someone injured may have been carried here. And it seemed Zagan wasn't the only one who noticed this, as Kuroka was also sniffing about.

"M-Mister, please let me down! It seems something happened!"

"Seems like it," Zagan replied, letting go of Kuroka, who stood up with her cane in hand. Perhaps having heard their voices, a single Angelic Knight walked out of the building. He also smelled of blood, which seemed to indicate that he had just finished a battle. As one would expect, there weren't any signs that someone collapsed within the cathedral. However, just as Zagan was puzzling over how his looked oddly familiar, the man yelled in a boisterous voice that made Zagan realize his identity.

"Grrr, you bastard! Why are you here!?"

"Huh? Oh, it's one of those three idiots..." Zagan said, realizing he was one of the knights close to Chastille. He was usually part of a set of three, yet since he was all on his own, Zagan didn't recognize him right away.

"I came to see Chastille, but it looks like you're all in the middle of something."

"Gaaah, don't you dare think she would meet with a bastard like you without an appointment!"

"Um, Mister, this is the church, right? Is the bishop here a scary one?" Kuroka hid behind Zagan and tugged at his sleeve, perhaps frightened by the Angelic Knight yelling with zeal.

"Don't worry about it. This guy's not a bishop, he's just some chump."

The Angelic Knight's face turned bright red as he barked at Zagan in anger.

"You insolent cur! We Knights of the Azure Sky are clergymen who have the qualifications of a bishop you... Wait, who are those girls?"

The Angelic Knight finally noticed Kuroka and Kuu and stared at them blankly.

"I found them in an alley. It seems Kuroka here has some business with the church. And Kuu here is just a poor girl who was abducted. Seems she has nowhere to go, so you lot should look after her."

"You impudent little... Ugh, but, you said she was abducted?"

"I was taken away by some scary men, and saved by these two," Kuu said, bobbing her head up and down as the Angelic Knight looked over to her.

"Grr... It seems... you're not lying," the man said as he knelt before Kuu before continuing, "I am an Angelic Knight named Torres."

This church is safe, so you may be at ease. We shall give you a place to live and take care of you.”

Kuu looked up at Zagan as if asking him if it was alright to believe the knight’s words.

“Setting this guy aside, the leader here is someone you can put your faith in. Though, it probably is fine to believe him.”

“O-Okay...” Kuu said, relaxing her guard.

“So? Was this girl also abducted?” Torres inquired as he turned to Kuroka.

“It’s true that she was abducted, but she says she was supposed to start working here yesterday.”

“Yesterday...?” Torres said as he tilted his head to the side, and eventually, his eyes opened wide.

“It can’t be... Are you the priest who was supposed to start working here yesterday, Kuroka Adelhide?”

“Y-Yes! I’m sorry for being late!”

This girl’s really a priest? That unexpected thought crossed Zagan’s mind as he watched Kuroka bow, clearly on the verge of tears. Priest was a fairly high position to hold within the church. Kuroka looked to be at most sixteen or seventeen years old, and she was even a four ears who seemed to receive harsh treatment at the best of time, and blind to boot. How exactly was she able to attain such a position? Setting Zagan’s doubts aside, the Angelic Knight looked to be truly relieved.

“Thank god. We thought that you had been attacked by monsters and were just about to send out a search party. I see... So you were struggling to try and save an abducted girl, then?”

“I-It wasn’t really anything all that praiseworthy... In the end, all I did was get caught.”

Well, it didn’t look like this girl had any sort of combat strength. With her eyesight, she wouldn’t be able to run away, but even so, it seemed that upon finding Kuu being abducted, she couldn’t just leave her alone.

If she’s a priest, then give her a damn escort... Zagan sighed in astonishment. And watching Kuroka bow down repeatedly in a charmed manner, Torres called out to her.

“Sorry for saying this right as you take up your post, but we’ll be putting you to work immediately. As you can see, it’s quite busy here. No matter how many helping hands we have, it isn’t enough.”

“Yes! I’ll do my best!”



Watching that exchange, a certain doubt suddenly popped up in Zagan's mind.

"Now that I think of it, what kind of work can you do when you're blind?"

"It's alright! Even with my eyes like this, I've memorized all the scriptures, so I can hold a congregation on my own!"

"Hm, that's quite impressive," Zagan replied nonchalantly. He was able to memorize everything within a grimoire upon reading it just once, but he was unable to memorize all the contents of that bulky bible he had no interest in. Moreover, Kuroka would have to had memorized every single word by having it read aloud to her by someone. That was surely quite a lot of work. However, in contrast to Zagan's admiration, Torres was left in shock.

"Huh? Blind? Can this girl not see...?"

"Can't you tell by looking at her?" Zagan responded. She was holding a cane, and when she talked she directed her voice to who she was talking to, but didn't meet their gaze. Even Zagan thought Torres was taking that into consideration a little, but he seemed shocked.

"I thought you came here to act as a civil official..."

Zagan and Kuroka both tilted their heads to the side. A civil official was responsible for desk work, including filing documents and deciding on civil policies.

She probably can't do anything like read documents... Is this really alright?

"H-Huh, um, could it be that I'm totally unneeded, or like... it was bad for me to come here...?" Kuroka said as she turned deathly pale.

"Ah, don't cry! I said we were shorthanded, right!? There is a mountain of things you can do!"

"Hic... Sorry, I'll do my best."

Having said that, it was her first time in this building, so the Angelic Knight took Kuroka's hand and guided her inside. Kuu followed after them and headed within the cathedral, and waved her hand at Zagan before parting ways with him.

"Thanks, Mister!"

"Yeah yeah, just get going already," Zagan shooed her away with both his words and hands, which made Kuroka turn around with a panicked expression on her face.

"Ah, p-please wait. Hey, Mister, what's your name?"

Now that she mentioned it, Zagan realized he never named himself.

Right, Kuu knew who I was already... Well, Kuroka was still a member of the church. She likely didn't have many good memories of getting involved with sorcerers. And so, Zagan decided it was better

not to tell her.

“Later then.”

Thus, he waved his hand and turned his back to her. And just as he went around the side of the cathedral to look for Chastille...

“So you’re finally alone, huh?”

He heard a gloomy voice come from the shadow right next to him.



An unhealthy-looking face suddenly crept out of the shadow cast by the building.

“Barbatos? Did something happen?”

It wasn’t a face he really liked looking at, but Zagan could grasp that something went wrong. If this man came out when he was supposed to be guarding Chastille, it definitely wasn’t for idle chatter. And Barbatos came completely out of the shadow while scratching his head in an annoyed manner.

“I got tired of waiting for you to be on your own, dammit.”

It seemed that it wasn’t something he wanted other people to hear.

“Hm... Hang on a sec,” Zagan said as he lightly tapped his heel against the ground and wove together a magic circle at his feet. Their figures then began distorting as if in a heat haze and vanished. It was a barrier that distorted both sound and light. Of course, it prevented them from being visible by any outsiders, and even if they yelled the only thing people would hear was a light wind. And, if someone were to draw near, they would lose their sense of direction and be ward off.

“You really can make this kinda thing in a single breath, huh...?” Barbatos whistled out in admiration as he looked around him.

“It’s not really all that difficult, is it?” Zagan said. Barbatos’ base, which Zagan destroyed, had the same kind of barrier set up around it.

“Haaah... Well, anybody can just make one. Given a few days, anyway,” Barbatos claimed. This sort of barrier was rather common, and its structure wasn’t all that complex. However, there were very few sorcerers who could create one on the spot without a chant or catalyst.

“So, what do you want?”

“...Hmph. You probably know those damn Angelic Knights are running about here and there, right? A chimera popped up in the nearby forest, and it’s become a huge mess.”

“What kind of idiot lost the leash to their pet dog... There’s no way it’s something like that, right?” Zagan asked as he squinted his eyes. Creatures created by sorcery like chimeras, golems, and homunculi suffered from necrosis immediately if not under the control

of a sorcerer. If a chimera was healthily running about, that meant some sorcerer willingly let it loose on a rampage within Zagan's territory.

Plus, it's impossible for a chimera's power to surpass the power of the sorcerer using it... If one were to use sorcery beyond their means, the sorcery would simply not activate or run wild. If one were able to create a chimera stronger than them, the first thing the chimera would attack would be the caster themselves. Zagan had once fought against a chimera made from the vestiges of a demon, but the one who created that was Archdemon Marchosias. It would surely be impossible to control a demon chimera without at least that level of strength, and in truth, it only activated after Marchosias' death, even.

"In other words, there's some overreaching idiot out there taking a shot at those Angelic Knights by setting a chimera loose in my territory, and even Chastille can't kill it, right?" Zagan inquired. Since a chimera was unable to surpass the strength of a sorcerer, there weren't many cases of Angelic Knights being taken down by chimeras. And in spite of that, it seemed there were casualties among the Angelic Knights in the cathedral Zagan was standing right next to. It was also only natural that their leader, Chastille, took to the field. If Barbatos was sent to inform Zagan of that fact, it meant that the chimera was still at large. In that case, the chimera would have to be on level with Marchosias' demon chimera.

"Well, it helps that you catch on so quick," Barbatos said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"What kind of chimera was it? You saw it, right?" Zagan asked. If he knew the characteristics of the chimera, it may have been possible to identify the caster. And in an unusual turn, Barbatos made a grim expression.

"It's quite the troublesome chimera. It regenerated completely even after being cut to pieces by that crybaby. Looks like it was made by blending multiple sorcerers too, since it's got human looking parts sticking out all over."

The culprit was a sorcerer, so there was no way it was going to be something wholesome, but it was still a dreadful story. Also, in the case that sorcerers were used, there was a possibility the chimera itself could use sorcery.

"And one more thing..." Barbatos muttered as if it was somewhat hard for him to say.

"What?"

"Somehow, I feel like I saw something similar not too long ago."

Zagan didn't have enough information to work anything out with only that much. And so, Barbatos spoke in a tone that made it seem like he was holding back his vomit.

“It’s that one... The monster that looked like mud that appeared in Suflaghida, I mean. The one Bifrons called the ‘Demon Lord’ or whatever.”

“Hmm...?” Zagan let out a quizzical voice.

Well, that thing really could regenerate its wounds instantly... At the time, it was a formidable enemy that took Zagan, Nephy with her newly attained celestial mysticism, two Sacred Sword wielders, several former Archdemon candidates, and a few dozen other sorcerers to fight it on even ground. So, if Barbatos was saying that it was similar, he surely wasn’t just referring to its ability to regenerate.

In that case, the culprit likely has the same goal.

“I see. In that case, the one who created that chimera is probably Bifrons,” Zagan muttered, seemingly putting his thoughts in order.

“...Hold on, aren’t you jumping to conclusions here?” Barbatos asked, sweat running down his brow.

“Although it was just residue, he resurrected the Demon Lord. There’s no way he was only just spectating. I bet he brought back some of its corpse or a core or something with him. Besides, the only one who could control something more dangerous than a demon like that would be the Archdemons,” Zagan spoke as if it was only obvious. According to Bifrons, the Sigil of the Archdemon held by the thirteen Archdemons was akin to a key that sealed the husk of the Demon Lord. That was why demons submitted to the Archdemons, and also why they were able to use the Sigil to call forth the residual thoughts of the Demon Lord. There was no other means of interfering with that existence which surpassed human intelligence other than the Sigil of the Archdemon.

I didn’t think that Bifrons was one to pull back so easily, but they’re acting faster than I imagined...

Barbatos also surely understood all this as a gulp rang out from his throat.

“Still, despite the chimera taking action, the place it showed up and its goal is a total mystery, huh? If Bifrons was planning to stir things up with me or Nephy, it would have made more sense to have it closer to the castle or somewhere we would be.”

The same even applied if Bifrons’ target was Chastille and her Sacred Sword. If Barbatos wasn’t saying anything about her, then that was proof that Chastille was alright. And, even if Bifrons left a target alive, there was no way they would just let their target get away.

Then, maybe it’s better to think that there’s some other goal, and it just so happened to get caught up in my territory... Zagan already taught Bifrons that it wasn’t worth stirring up trouble with him, so the only reason for Bifrons to kick up a fuss while bearing that risk in mind was...

“Nephteros, huh?” Zagan remarked. If the girl who disappeared at the hidden elven village was being chased for some reason, it would make sense to send a fiendish chimera after her. That dark elf possessed enough power that an entire group of average sorcerers and Angelic Knights couldn’t even keep up, after all.

Barbatos’ body stiffened up completely. Judging by his reaction, the man knew that Nephteros was involved but kept quiet about it. And so, Zagan glared at him fixedly.

“Why did you keep quiet about Nephteros?”

“That crybaby... said to keep quiet.”

“Hmm...?” Zagan exclaimed. He didn’t know what exactly happened, but Chastille doing such a thing and Barbatos cooperating with her were both unexpected actions.

Although, since this is Nephteros we’re talking about... Judging from her personality...

“If she didn’t want me to know, it means she didn’t want Nephy to find out, huh?”

“Were you watching?”

It seemed Zagan hit the bulls-eye, leaving Barbatos completely taken aback.

“No, isn’t it pretty easy to figure out considering the situation and her personality?”

“Like anyone could tell...”

“Well, whatever,” Zagan casually replied.

“Huh? Is that alright?”

“She’s not a kid. If Chastille says she want to keep it quiet, then that means she decided to look after her herself. Let her do as she pleases,” Zagan said shrugged his shoulders in response to Barbatos’ surprised reaction.

“Don’t you feel like nothing good will come from this?”

“That girl’s a complete crybaby in her personal life, but she’s capable when she’s at work.”

“...Were you praising her there?” Barbatos said with an exasperated look on his face, but didn’t quip about it any further.

Yeah, forget all that, I want to go on that so-called date with Nephy! Like I give a crap about someone like Bifrons! Zagan thought, though a moment later he was taken aback as his mind wandered, *No, wait a sec. Is it even possible that Nephteros is the only thing Bifrons is aiming for?*

Sure, Bifrons was a sorcerer whose very purpose in life seemed to be to harass people. But still, it would be idiotic to assume Bifrons let their pet dog who betrayed them free so that they could torment them, especially when she somehow managed to escape all the way to Zagan’s territory. Was it not far more natural to think that Bifrons was

intentionally aiming to stir up trouble right at the moment Zagan didn't want anyone to interfere with his plans the most?

In other words, Bifrons was aiming for this instant where I just wanted to have a quiet date with Nephy! That conclusion may have just been a result of his persecution complex, but unfortunately, the Archdemon Bifrons was a sorcerer who couldn't make any excuses when accused of such deeds.

"Ku... Kuhahaha..." Zagan spontaneously broke out into laughter.

"H-Hey... Zagan...?" Barbatos muttered, looking quite startled. It was a laugh that he hadn't let out lately... Or rather, one that he hadn't let out since he met Nephy. And that fact made Barbatos shrink back in fear.

"How amusing. It seems that damned idiot has yet to learn their lesson. How dare they try to make a fool of me."

The beautiful stone pavement cracked under the pressure of Zagan's mana boiling over from his rage.

"It seems it's about time to finish off Bifrons. There's no need to worry about them anymore," Zagan proclaimed as he shifted his gaze over to Barbatos.

"What's got you so... The hell is Bifrons planning?"

"I'm saying there's no need for you to care about that," Zagan dryly replied. He felt like Barbatos would make fun of him if he said it was because Bifrons planned on getting in the way of his date with Nephy, so he simply glared at him in an overbearing manner. Thanks to that, Barbatos gulped down and sealed his mouth shut.

"Is that all you have to report?"

"Ah? Yeah..."

"Then get going. I have business with Chastille before I go and kill Bifrons."

"G-Got it..." Barbatos said, nodding with a worried expression on his face before vanishing into the shadows. After seeing him off, Zagan once more tapped his heel and undid the barrier. Chastille's office was faster to get to from the backdoor of the cathedral. And as he walked that way, he took one last look into the cathedral. Kuroka was running about carrying a large container of hot water, and fell over in a spectacular fashion.



Zagan boldly marched into the rear entrance of the church's sanctum as if he owned the place.

Now that I think of it, this is the first time I've come this way, isn't it? He'd gone to visit Chastille with Nephy before, but they always talked in the sanctum. He'd never been in the inner areas. Angelic Knights immediately rushed out with their swords drawn, but came to a halt

the moment they saw Zagan's face.

"Ugh... Y-You're Archdemon Zagan! What business do you have with the church!?"

Though it was a temporary position, Chastille was still the one in charge here, and she was a member of the Unification Faction that aimed to coexist with sorcerers instead of being openly hostile toward them. However, that only applied to Chastille herself. It seemed the regular Angelic Knights still despised sorcerers.

I hate dealing with Angelic Knights since they're such a pain... It probably would've been fine to just ignore them and kick them aside, but this region was under Chastille's jurisdiction. Thus, Zagan spoke with the bare minimum amount of respect for that fact.

"I have business with Archangel Chastille. Is she in her office?"

The Angelic Knights shrank back as if intimidated, but nevertheless, they gripped their swords with their trembling hands and howled back.

"G-Grrr... Understood. I shall call her, so wait in the guest room."

"Don't bother, it won't take that long. I can tell things are busy."

Arbitrarily making that decision, Zagan briskly proceeded into the sanctum. The Angelic Knights stiffened in place, but didn't obstruct him, perhaps because his lack of hostility was conveyed to them.

"I-I couldn't move...! We must inform Lady Chastille of the impending danger!"

"Wait, did he maybe mean... 'I can tell that you're busy, so there's no need to go out of your way to call her'?"

"Huh, no, I mean, isn't he an Archdemon?"

"Well, you've got a point, but..."

The knights were mumbling to each other about something or other, but soon after they tagged along behind Zagan in an attempt to keep an eye on him.

If you've got that much free time, then go and treat the wounded or something... Having said that, they all likely had their own jobs assigned to them, so it wasn't something for Zagan to criticize. The solitary sound of solid shoes tapping against the wooden floors resounded throughout the quiet corridor. The inside of the church was fairly well maintained, but unlike the sanctum, it had a simple and compact layout. Zagan thought it would be lined with luxurious goods, since the church often wrangled donations out of the populace, but that was unexpectedly not the case.

Well, I suppose the Angelic Knights are soldiers. They do at least deserve a wage that compensates them for laying their lives on the line... It seemed several Angelic Knights had just lost their lives. There was surely a need to provide their families with compensation for that as well, so the compulsory donations may not have been a complete

scam.

After walking for some time while contemplating such matters, Zagan arrived at Chastille's office. Verifying that the nameplate was indeed correct, he then knocked on the door.

"Chastille, are you there?"

"Ah! Huh? That voice... Zagan?"

After some clattering echoed from within the room, the door eventually opened.

"Um, come on in..." Chastille said, poking her head out with a clearly confused expression on her face.

Could it be that Nephteros is inside? According to Barbatos, Chastille wanted to keep her a secret. And so, Zagan pretended not to notice and averted his gaze.

"Um, I heard what happened from Barbatos. Do you have time to talk right now?"

"Y-You came all the way here for that? Were you, um, w-worried...?" Chastille asked, her face noticeably flushed.

"Well, I have other business here too..." Zagan said as he looked at the Angelic Knights behind him. Chastille was currently in her work mode, so after figuring out what Zagan was implying, she nodded.

"He is my guest. I'll be fine here, so please return to your duties."

"B-But..."

"Hey, get the hint already..."

There was one among them trying to raise an objection, but another knight saluted and cut him off.

"If you require any further assistance, please call for us, Lady Chastille."

And so, the Angelic Knights left. Several among them seemed to be crying with drooped shoulders.

"No way... To think Lady Chastille would fall for a man like that..."

"No! There's still no definitive proof!"

"Don't say that, Dominguez. If Lady Chastille has decided on someone, then we should accept it."

"Wipe your tears, Andal."

Oh, come on, they're saying some pretty inexcusable things here... Is that really alright? Chastille didn't seem to hear what the knights were whispering about, and simply cocked her head to the side with a blank expression on her face.

"What's wrong? Are you not going to come in?"

"...Well, whatever," Zagan said as he decided to pretend he didn't hear anything and stepped into the office. It was a compact room that could be traversed from one end to the other with three long strides or so. It was also the room where Raphael once assassinated Clavwell,

but there was no disturbing aura lingering in the air.

Nobody else seemed to be present. There was a large oak desk in the room with a pile of miscellaneous documents on it. And next to it was a short table and sofas meant for receiving guests, which was where Chastille took a seat.

“A-Anyway, take a seat. Everyone is really busy right now, so I can’t offer much in the way of hospitality, unfortunately.”

“How exactly would Angelic Knights go about offering a sorcerer hospitality, I wonder...” Zagan was astonished, yet Chastille returned a bitter smile.

“Did you actually forget what faction I belong to?”

Zagan didn’t really know what activities the Unification Faction undertook, but it seemed this situation wasn’t really all that bad to them. Judging from the fact that Chastille was able to respond so casually, he could tell that Chastille really was in ‘work mode,’ which made him shrug his shoulders.

“Hmph. I suppose so,” Zagan said as he took a seat on the sofa. Then, he noticed that Chastille was restlessly looking at the wall behind him. Taking a glance over in that direction, he spotted an inconspicuous cupboard standing against the wall with a small hidden door behind it. Considering the location, it was likely something like a break room for her office. The way Chastille was staring at it made Zagan think she was worried whether things were really alright over there instead of being anxious about whether or not Zagan would spot it.

Could it be that Nephteros is in there? He thought that she was rather dignified when on duty, but it seemed that her inability to keep secrets wasn’t all that different from when she was going about her daily life. Zagan tried straining his ears and searched for a presence, but he only managed to barely pick up the faint sound of someone breathing. There were no signs of any movements at all. She was likely in a deep slumber, or perhaps just unconscious.

Which means... Nephteros really was injured somehow? Zagan knew that Nephteros was somehow involved, but he never bothered to think about her condition. He wanted to make his request about the ‘Thirteenth’ and leave right away, but after noticing her condition, ignoring her had become difficult. And so, after brooding over it for a few seconds and reclining in the sofa, Zagan cut to the chase.

“A chimera or something showed up, right? The one manipulating it is, most likely, Bifrons.”

“That’s amazing. I didn’t think you would know that much, since I just encountered it,” Chastille said, staring back at him in wonder all the while.

“Bifrons is my enemy. It’s not something for you to be concerned

about. I don't mind if you leave dealing with that Archdemon and chimera to me."

If I leave something like a chimera prowling about, then I can't go on a relaxing date with Nephy! That was the number one priority for Zagan right now. And though Chastille looked surprised for a moment, she immediately smiled.

"There's nothing I find more reassuring than hearing you say that... but for you to be so angry... Could it be that something happened to Nephy too?"

Huh? Was she always this perceptive? Zagan knew she was quite capable when on duty, but she was far more astute than he imagined she would be. She was right on the mark, but it was difficult to tell her that it was because they were getting in the way of his date, so Zagan cleared out his throat as if glossing over that fact.

"Well, nothing yet. However, Bifrons will surely mess with me and Nephy soon enough. That's why I'll just finish things off before it comes to that."

"Huh...? I don't really get it, but if that will ensure Nephy's safety, then I don't have any objections," Chastille claimed, though her smile was somewhat uneasy. She really did seem worried about Nephteros.

"Come to think of it, he said you picked up a wounded sorcerer. Quite the unlucky fellow to get attacked by Bifrons' chimera. How are they?" Zagan asked, pretending not to know it was Nephteros.

"Y-Yeah, that's right... Their injuries aren't all that serious, but they've lost quite a bit of strength... I sure hope they're alright..." Chastille's body trembled as she replied. It wasn't really a leading question, but Chastille didn't seem to notice that she was frowning as he touched on the subject.

Back when she used celestial mysticism, Nephteros coughed up blood... Celestial mysticism likely placed all too great a burden on her body. Just from that, Zagan could tell that the chimera powerful, since it forced her to use it.

"When mana is exhausted by the use of sorcery and mysticism, it takes time to recover. Sure, there are ways of supplying it from outside, but it's best to just let them rest."

"Huh? You can get mana from somewhere else?"

It may have been a mistake to mention mysticism here, but that wasn't the point that piqued Chastille's interest.

I guess that just means Nephteros is in a worse state than I initially assumed... Having said that, there wasn't really anything Chastille could do about it.

"Well, I just meant that it's not impossible. Nobody does it normally," Zagan stated. Though, he felt like someone like Gremory would happily do it, which led him to realize he should remain quiet

about Nephtheros' condition to that granny.

"Could you at least tell me how it's done? Is supplying mana something that can be done even if you're not a sorcerer?"

"Uh, no, well, I think you can, but..."

"Then I want to know how. There might be someone I can save thanks to that method."

Um... I need to say this to a woman? Zagan grimaced and was reluctant to answer her.

"Is it dangerous?" Chastille was left with an uneasy expression upon seeing Zagan's reaction.

"Well, yes, but also no. Hm, how do I put it..."

Zagan wanted her to just figure it out, but it was unreasonable to demand an Angelic Knight figure out things that were common sense in the world of sorcery.

"I think it's better if you don't know, honestly."

"I want to know more about sorcerers... Is that so bad?" Chastille, who showed no signs of figuring it out, looked at him with an expectant gaze. It seemed there was no backing out of telling her. And so, Zagan let out a sigh and answered her reluctantly.

"Well, things like kissing... or sexual intercourse... or the like..."

Precisely because it was so primitive, it was a simple method. There was sorcery that could forcefully suck away the mana of those who stepped within one's domain, but it wasn't something just anybody could do. And having finally caught on to what he was saying, Chastille blinked back at him in a daze, as her expectant expression turned bright red.

"S-S-S-S-S-Sorry! I shouldn't have asked!"

"...It's fine, I don't really mind or anything," Zagan said as he awkwardly averted his gaze. Seeing that he'd created a strange atmosphere, he hurried to change the subject.

"Anyway, even if you're in the Unification Faction, is it really alright for Angelic Knights to so openly aid a sorcerer?"

The people of this church were obviously wary of Zagan.

Well, I guess it's because I look kind of evil, huh...? Zagan was aware of that fact, so he wasn't going to start complaining about it.

"Even I won't hesitate to kill a sorcerer who assaults the people. The Unification Faction and Anti-Unification Faction aren't split along those lines. Our difference is more about considering what's in a person's heart," Chastille replied as she once more stared back in wonder, then shook her head with a strained smile.

"Meaning?"

"It's hard to put it in words, but I think it's basically having or not having faith in the possibility of a person being good at heart."

"Hmm, that's quite philosophical."

“Not really,” Chastille said as she combed back her bangs with calm mannerisms, then continued, “To me, whether or not someone is a sorcerer, I believe people have the chance to change. Faults are not something to be punished, but something one should work to redeem. Many sorcerers may stain their hands with sin, but as long as they repent, I believe it is possible to reconcile and cooperate with them.”

“It’s not like I don’t understand what you’re saying, but don’t you think it’s impossible?”

“It’s true that it’ll be difficult when the status quo is Angelic Knights mercilessly branding sorcerers as their mortal enemies, but unification should be possible if we figure out exactly how much each of us can concede.”

“I see. In short, you mean to segregate one from the other. However, even if you do that, idiots who’ll cross the boundary will exist on both sides, you know?”

“You’re right, but isn’t that the same as saying crime will never go away? As long as we both decide on the rules and clearly delineate who passes down judgment, it should be something we can deal with. At the very least, the church has never made an effort to do so in the past. In that case, I do believe there is value in giving it a try.”

Her response left Zagan astonished.

That damn Raphael. He sure has an eye for people, doesn’t he?

Chastille’s statement just now wasn’t just a tall claim. She properly accepted the current status quo, presented a possibility to reform it, and figured out a means to implement it. There likely wasn’t another person within the church who was a more ideal symbol of unification.

“That’s why I’ll save a sorcerer if they need to be saved, and I’ll stop one that violates our laws. That’s how I’m thinking about acting, but... do I come off weird?”

She got timid right at the end, but that was, in fact, really just like her. And so, Zagan shot a strained smile back at her.

“Who knows? Still, if you weren’t like that, then we wouldn’t be having a conversation here, would we? Just let those guys say whatever they want about whether or not it’s correct.”

“You never let others influence you, huh? I’m honestly envious of that part of you,” Chastille said. She managed to calm down quite a bit while they were talking, and was now smiling naturally.

It should be fine to cut to the chase now, right? Zagan looked up at the clock as if concerned about the time, and then pulled out a piece of paper from his breast pocket.

“We’ve gone off topic a bit here. I know you’re busy, but there’s something I’d like to ask of you.”

“A request for me? How rare.”

“Have you seen this before? It was written in one of the diaries

from the hidden elven village,” Zagan said as he showed Chastille the crests for the Thirteenth. And in response, after staring at it for a while, Chastille shook her head.

“It looks a lot like the crests on Sacred Swords, but I don’t recall seeing anything identical to that.”

“I bet you haven’t. This is a design that shouldn’t exist among the twelve Sacred Swords.”

“That is to say, there are other Sacred Swords?” Chastille grasped the meaning of those words, and her expression stiffened up as she replied to him. Figuring it out just from what he said showed that she was currently in work mode.

“Maybe. That’s why I want you to dig around within the church to find out the truth.”

“I wonder if that will be possible... It’s not like I have a full grasp of the church, either. I think it’ll be hard even if I rely on my comrades,” Chastille said, unable to immediately accept his request. By comrades, she likely meant the other members of the Unification Faction.

“Would Raphael not be more knowledgeable of such matters?”

“About that... According to him, it might be a part of the dark side of the church or something.”

“By dark side... you mean those rumors about an agency within the church that assassinates people?” Chastille blinked in disbelief as if doubting her ears when she said that. Her response made it clear that Chastille had at least heard of it.

“Seems so. He was also looking into that dark side or whatever. While he was still alive, I mean,” Zagan added. Even if it was Chastille’s office, there was no way of knowing if there was anyone listening in on them. That was why Zagan emphasized Raphael’s current state as seen by the public eye.

“Was Lord Clavwell... working with them?” Chastille asked as she bitterly bit down on her lip.

“I’m honestly not sure. Raphael didn’t seem to have evidence, but that man supposedly assassinated multiple generations of Archangels. There’s a pretty high probability that he was involved with them.”

Poison that could even kill an Archangel clad in Anointed Armor was not something easily obtained, even if one were a cardinal. Chastille looked troubled about this for a moment, but immediately nodded.

“Got it. I don’t know how much help I’ll be, but I’ll look through Clavwell’s records.”

“I’ll leave it to you... But, well, there’s the chimera out there too. Keep it within reason.”

“Okay... Wait, huh?” Chastille cocked her head to the side after

nodding at his words.

“Um, are you... looking out for me?”

“Why even ask? Didn’t I stick a ‘babysitter’ to you because I would be troubled if you died?”

“No, not that... Um, when you were talking about the chimera just now...”

Thinking back on it, Zagan felt like his normal self would have just cut straight to the chase.

Well, it’d also be a pain if she let things slip because she’s too shaken up... Blabbing on and on about the dark side and such things would be like asking to be assassinated.

“Thank you. I’ll look into that crests as much as I can,” Chastille said, finally looking relieved. And, after saying that, she suddenly noticed something.

“Ah, hold on, do you know how this is pronounced? The names of Sacred Swords are written in Celestian, right?”

“Oops, I almost forgot,” Zagan said as he inadvertently clasped his hands together before continuing with, “Azazel. That seems to be the name of the Thirteenth.”

That name had an oddly ominous ring to it, considering it was the name of a Sacred Sword.



“Haaah... Haaah... Fuck, what shitty luck!”

“Ain’t it the opposite? We’re goddamn lucky he let us go. Normally, we’d just be fucking dead.”

“We lost our first good prize in a while, though...”

After distancing themselves from the shopping district, the slave trader canus were cursing and swearing at each other in the suburbs of Kianoides. It was already dark out, and spurred on by the fear of whether the dreadful Archdemon known as Zagan was chasing them or not, they had been running about the entire time.

However, after doing that for a few hours, they were out of stamina. Once they stopped moving their feet, their lips loosened up, and next they began the unsightly act of trying to shirk responsibility for what happened onto each other.

“That’s why I said we shoulda sold them yesterday!”

“You say that now, but you didn’t really do anything ’bout that, right!?”

All they were doing was despicably trying to push the blame onto someone else. However, one of the canus felt a sense of unease separate from their misfortune.

“Hey, why was it that we tried to catch that girl and sell her yesterday, anyway?”

These canus dealt in the slave trade. They didn't buy slaves, they looked for good materials to abduct and sell. Naturally, they couldn't complain at all if they were mercilessly killed after being tracked down. Precisely because that was the case, it was absolutely necessary to keep their risks to a bare minimum. So why was it that just this one time, they were carelessly out in the open with their prey?

"I mean, she was valuable, yeah? We wanted to sell her for as much as we could... right?"

"But, did we even do anything to help up the price? What were we even planning in the first place?"

Unlike proper slave merchants, these canus were the type to sell their goods for dirt cheap on the black market. In that case, there was no point in keeping their goods in perfect condition. They should have been fully aware of that, so why didn't they sell off the girls right away? None of them were able to answer that question, and the canus all felt a sense of eeriness lingering in the air due to that revelation.

"D-Does that even freaking matter!? She got away, so why worry now!? More importantly, we've at least got the coin that she was carrying, right?"

"Y-Yeah, you're right..."

Working in the slave business came hand in hand with unpleasant events. It was normal in such cases to just drown away one's worries in alcohol. However, just as they were about to head off to find a tavern...

"Hm? Hey, ain't that the one from earlier...?"

For some reason, the vulpin girl that got away from them earlier was right ahead of them. She looked to be walking unsteadily with wobbly steps, which confused them greatly. Still, after taking a glance at each other, the canus men smiled filthily.

"Hey there, little lady. It's awfully dangerous to be walking out here all on your own."

"Uh... Huh...?"

The young girl looked up at the canus men with a vacant expression that made them doubt she could even hear them. No matter how they looked at it, it didn't seem like she understood what was going on.

"Hey, did something happen to her?"

"Ain't Zagan a sorcerer? There's no way he left a tasty looking girl he picked up alone, right?"

In other words, even though she had been rescued from the foul clutches of the slavers, she had been forced to go through something even more terrifying.

"Heehee, so she came back to us knowing she'd be happier here, huh? It's rich coming from me, but this is the first time I've seen such

an unlucky girl.”

The girl didn't seem to hear the conversation happening in front of her, and simply stood stock-still. Seeing her vacant gaze, the lower halves of the canus reacted.

“Hey. Why don't we just have a lil' taste?”

“That's not a bad idea. The shops are all closed already, anyway. Let's just use her to cheer ourselves up some.”

The men forcefully tore apart the girl's clothes with vulgar smiles on their faces. And when her shapely breasts were exposed, they began licking their lips. Right then, as one of the men reached out to her... his arm vanished from the elbow down.

“Huh...?”

Blood spurted out like a geyser from the stump of his arm. This man probably didn't even understand that it was torn off by a power that far surpassed human intellect. He stood there, dumbfounded for just one instant, as the pain immediately rushed to his brain.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH! M-MY ARRRRRRM!”

All the others could see was a man writhing in pain on the ground, a pitch black sludge-like thing boiling over from the girl's chest, and that man's arm sinking away into said sludge. There was none among them who could understand in that instant that this was something far beyond their means.

“Y-You bitch!”

One of the canus pulled out a knife in anger, but before he could even brandish it, the sludge stretched out like a tentacle. And in the next instant, his dog-like head burst open like a fruit. However, what was strange was that there was no blood flowing down from that severed neck. The first canus, who had his arm torn off, had blood flowing out like waterfall. However, all that could be seen from this one was a completely pitch black cross section that was akin to a dark void in the air.

Before long, a nightmarish scene played out. The body of the canus without a head was crushed as if being sucked inside itself. And what burst out in the aftermath was not blood, but the sludge which destroyed his head. Even without knowledge in sorcery, it was readily apparent that it had eaten the canus.

“Holy shit, r-run a—”

One of the canus turned tail to run, but his ankle was mowed down by a tentacle like a scythe cutting through wheat, making him slam face first into the pavement.

“Gargh! H-Help... HEEEEELGHRP!”

Sludge poured out of the screaming canus' face. He was being eaten from the inside out. His agonizing cry of death was deafening, but it vanished in seconds. By that time, his body had dissolved

entirely.

The other men tried to run away as well, but their show of resistance was futile. In no time at all, everyone aside from the first man who had his arm ripped off melted away into sludge. The man was unable to mutter so much as a word as he trembled in place, clattering in fear, and the girl's eyeballs tumbled about as they focused in on him. In that moment, for the very first time, an actually expressive look graced her face, and she looked at the canus in surprise.

"Oh, what's this? Interesting, you managed to survive... I see. You're so weak that your arm got torn off before getting eaten. Aren't you lucky to be so weak? Ahahahaa."

The girl's laugh made it hard to determine their true gender. She then began walking around the canus in good humor without trying to hide her exposed breasts. This clearly wasn't the voice of the young girl that they tried to capture earlier.

"Wh-What the hell..."

The man wasn't expecting an actual answer. However, the girl looked at him with madness in her eyes as she laughed.

"Whoops, sorry about that. Did I forget to introduce myself? I'm not sure whether you guys know me or not, but I'm Bifrons. A colleague of the one who oversees this town, Zagan."

The girl span on the spot as she practically sang out her introduction.

"I went just a teensy bit overboard when I was playing with my cute little doll, you see, so she ended up escaping into Zagan's territory. Still, losing my precious little doll to Zagan would be a shame, right? That's why I'm in the middle of setting up a little prank to keep them apart!"

The little girl, who named herself Bifrons, began laughing maniacally once more.

"Zagan's quite scary, but luckily, he's got many weak points. This girl's body is just one such thing. I also want to show Zagan that he's not the only one who got their hands on a Sacred Sword... Fufufu, this'll be a wonderful party!"

As the girl laughed maniacally yet again, she squatted down in front of the man. The canus had already lost consciousness from the blood loss, so his death was surely only a matter of time.

"I missed the chance to say this earlier, but you have my thanks. Because of you guys, I managed to get Azazel in contact with Zagan. Ufufu, the little girl that he got along with will become an avenger filled to the brim with hatred and animosity. Ahhh, what a tragedy! Haaah... How fun... Uh, can you hear me?"

Seeing that the man's eyes were already rolled back, the little girl

puffed out her cheeks.

“Oh, come on. I went out of my way to reveal all my plans to you, and this is how you repay me...? Nephteros would always listen to me right to the end, you know? But maybe I doted on her just a little too much. I don't have any patience, you see? Ahaha.”

After laughing a while longer, the girl opened her mouth in satisfaction. And then, a pitch black sludge poured out from there like drool.

“Well, bye now. Though you're just a corpse, be happy you get to become an offering to the Demon Lord!”

After the girl said that, the last remaining canus was swallowed by the sludge.

“...Huh?”

The vulpin girl's triangular ears quivered about as she raised her head.

“Huh...? What...? Where...? Why am I...?”

And while letting out a bewildered voice, she noticed that her chest felt strangely cold.

“Eek! Wh-What's going on!? My clothes are torn!?”

Seeing that her own clothes were in shreds, a horrible image came to mind, but there was nothing around her. She also didn't feel anything like the aftermath of being assaulted.

“...Still, I feel strange...”

She was anxious about what had happened to her body, but that anxiety gradually faded away and vanished for some reason.

“Umm...? What was I doing again? An errand... right? Hm, guess I'll just head back to the church.”

Thus, the little girl went back to her new home without ever realizing the truth.

Chapter III: There Are Many Unexpectedly Kind People in the World, but There Are Also a Lot Who Aren't

“W-Welcome back, Sir Zagan.”

Kimaris and Gremory greeted Zagan as he returned to his castle. The two of them were ex-Archdemon candidates, and now served as Zagan's subordinates. Both of them were sorcerers who were able to change their appearance at will. Kimaris was in his humanoid form with his black mane swaying about, and Gremory was riding on his shoulder in the form of a little girl. During the day, they went over to the preceding Archdemon Marchosias' castle. The two of them were granted permission to do 'a certain something' over there, and had just returned themselves.

Nephy's... not here, huh? How rare... Normally, whenever Zagan went out, Nephy would always come out to welcome him back at the castle's entrance. And yet, she was nowhere to be found this time around. It may have been that she was in the middle of making preparations for dinner and was unable to step aside for a minute, but Zagan was mostly just hoping she hadn't gotten ill or anything. Nevertheless, his subordinates showed up to greet him, so Zagan raised his hand as he replied.

“Mm. Good job. You two just got back, right? Perfect timing.”

“Yes. Were you in town, Sir Zagan?”

“Yeah.”

“By the way, why are you in that form? Let me just tell you now, even if you look like a child, I won't spoil you like Foll or anything...” Zagan looked over to the tiny Gremory as he said that.

“You've got it all wrong! Going around as an old woman when I'm tired hurts my back!”

Wait, does that mean she uses this form to alleviate back pain...?

Gremory's standard form was an old woman with a hunched back, and she walked around like that without even using a cane. It was no surprise that it was actually painful.

“Besides, in this form, I can get a ride from Kimaris without him getting embarrassed over it, so I just ended up thinking of it as a

necessity,” Gremory continued on while fiddling with the goat horns on her juvenile head. It was hard to tell through his black mane, but it seemed that Kimaris was blushing. The very tip of his nose was just a little red.

“Kimaris, it’s probably wrong to spoil her too much, you know?”

“...Yes. I’ll be careful.”

Zagan sensed their bond was much like his undesired friendship with Barbatos. Though Kimaris nodded, he could tell he’d let Gremory ride on his shoulder again.

“It’s not like I plan on getting in between you two. Anyway, how did it go at Archdemon Palace?”

Kimaris and Gremory exchanged glances, then each of them made a complex expression.

“The prospect of restoring the preceding Archdemon’s golem looks brighter than expected. I think it will serve well as a defensive mechanism. However, as for the other matter...” Kimaris replied.

“My liege, I don’t think I’m well suited for that. Or rather, like I can even control that thing!”

Well, it stood to reason after seeing her worn out figure. Gremory was screaming while making a face like she had completely given up.

“Sorcerers all have a field of expertise. Setting myself aside, I believe that Miss Gremory’s sorcery isn’t suited for this purpose,” Kimaris replied with a nod. Gremory’s sorcery was able to meddle with the flow of time of a living being. In a way, it could be said that she was able to manipulate life itself. On the other hand, Kimaris specialized in sorcery that manipulated sound. It wasn’t to Zagan’s level, but it was suited for combat and he had already brought about useful results with it.

“...I see. But you two are the only ones I can think of who can make use of ‘that.’ I don’t care if it takes time, just get it working somehow.”

“If my liege insists, then there is no way for me to refuse, is there?” Gremory said, reluctantly nodding despite the grimace on her face.

“I feel odd saying this, but is it really alright for us to be the ones to use ‘that?’ I do find it to be quite the honor... but, how do I put it... Wouldn’t that mean that we would hold too much power?” Kimaris added.

“What’s wrong with that?” Zagan replied, tilting his head to the side.

“Heed my words, my liege. That is your asset. Moreover, it is such a dangerous and extravagant asset that it can change the world if used poorly, but you’re just handing it out to a couple of newcomers like us,” Gremory replied in Kimaris’ stead in an astonished tone. In other

words, they were worried that Zagan didn't truly understand its worth.

"Hmm, let's see... An Archdemon isn't a symbol among monsters like those in stories. It is a title given to people who stand at the peak of skill in sorcery. The other Archdemons may be eager to become such monsters, but I recognize myself as a king."

Orias may have had a similar mentality to Zagan's, but she was a lonely king who had no retainers. That was just a different path from the one Zagan took.

"A king is one who rewards their loyal retainers. You lot have done good work already, and I would like that to continue. That's why I granted you power as a reward."

Both Gremory and Kimaris looked like they couldn't believe what he was saying.

"Is that strange?"

"Now then, I wonder... is it?" Gremory muttered with an unusually serious expression as her eyes cast down, then continued, "It certainly is off the beaten path for a sorcerer to think like that. In the first place, sorcerers only ever think of themselves. We sorcerers, who live in the shadows, are far more evil than your thoughts suggest. Having said that, you are definitely not like that. Living on neither the path of evil or righteousness, you walk a thin line..."

This was not criticism, but Gremory was trying to find the answer herself. And soon after, she suddenly looked up at Zagan.

"Oh, I see. Such is kingship, right?"

And having found the answer, both Gremory and Kimaris bowed before Zagan.

"All is as our liege wills it."

"But, in that case, is it alright not to grant it to Foll as well? That was something you should have originally granted to Lady Foll, as she is your daughter, Sir Zagan," Kimaris said, then looked up at Zagan's face as if checking on his complexion. He certainly had a point. The job that Zagan entrusted to the two of them was something that Foll was most suitable for as his adopted daughter, as a dragon, and as an ex-Archdemon candidate.

What's more, Archdemon Palace is full of mechanisms that use dragon spells to move... It was obvious that Foll suited the space best.

"That was what I was originally planning. Even now, Foll desires greater strength."

"Then..."

Nevertheless, Zagan shook his head with a strict expression on his face.

"A thought crossed my mind when I looked at Nephy in the hidden elven village. Both myself and Nephy... or rather, most

sorcerers, didn't have a proper childhood, right?"

"That's..."

Both Kimaris and Gremory seemed to come upon a sudden realization, and were unable to answer him.

"It's a little rich coming from me, but I just thought that I'd like for Foll to be able to experience that."

Sitting atop Zagan and Nephys laps, having picture books read to her, coaxing them for sweets, sleeping together... Zagan wanted her to pass her time doing such things that were completely obvious for a normal family. The fact that she could attain such a thing after losing her real father Orobas was already a miracle in itself.

"The power I have granted you two will surely become a curse that binds you. The price for attaining power is that you will no longer be able to live a life unrelated to it. That's why... it's too early for Foll. I'll wait for her to grow just a little more."

"That's the face of a doting father alright. That little dragon sure is loved, isn't she? I wish I had a parent who said such things. Let may say so once more... Nice love power!" Gremory said as she let out a wistful sigh. Then, she formed a broad grin and asked, "Hey, my liege. Won't you become my daddy? Look, I'm a little girl! And I'm not against the idea of being trained into the kind of woman you like, either..."

"Can it," Zagan brushed her off and waved his hand.

"I'm being relatively serious here, you know?" Gremory sullenly puffed out her cheeks as she said that.

"Look, Kimaris doesn't like it. Quit it already."

And perhaps being shaken by those words, Kimaris suddenly dropped Gremory.

"FUGYA!?"

"Oh, sorry Miss Gremory. Did your clothes get dirty?"

"Shouldn't you be more worried about my face here!?"

And as Zagan gazed at their little quarrel, Kimaris spoke up to change the subject.

"I-In any case, Sir Zagan, did you not have some sort of business with us?"

"Whoops, you're right," Zagan replied, as he then lowered his voice and said, "That damn Bifrons is picking a fight again."

Both Gremory and Kimaris stiffened upon hearing that name. It was only natural. Both of them had nearly died from getting involved with Bifrons before, and protection from that was why they chose to become Zagan's subordinates in the first place.

"It seems Bifrons' actual objective is something else. Still, that doesn't change the fact that Bifrons is looking down on me by doing whatever they want in my territory," Zagan claimed, then laughed

suddenly and struck Kimaris' broad chest with a thud before saying, "That kind of idiot needs to take a good punch to the face to fix their manners, right?"

Zagan went on to describing the 'enemy' that was sent after them. After hearing of what Chastille's group had fought, Gremory turned pale as a ghost. However, telling them there was nothing to fear, Zagan informed them of one last thing.

"You hear me? That guy will come and mess with us at full force if we let him walk all over us. At this rate, things will go worse than anything we imagine. That's why I don't mind you putting 'that' to use. Receive them with courtesy and slaughter them."

"As you will," Kimaris exclaimed, looking initially surprised before a ferocious smile befitting of a lion rose to his face.

"I must say, the sight of Bifrons frothing at the mouth will be quite the sight," Gremory added with a delightful laugh. Then, she continued, "Well, we best rid ourselves of Bifrons soon. Otherwise, you'll never get to have a relaxing date with Lady Nephy."

"...Hey, Gremory. I don't think it's possible... but did you lend Foll that picture book with that in mind?" Zagan asked as his body stiffened.

"Keeheehee, though you two possess superfluous talent, you're worse than any late bloomers I've ever encountered. If I don't give the two of you a little push, won't you just end up stuck in the same place forever? Hm? Is that really alright? Nay, it isn't! I can't stand just watching anymore!" Gremory proclaimed. As ever, the old granny who just went and did anything she wanted gave Zagan a headache.

Well, it's true that I had no idea what to do myself... This granny even sent him an extremely descriptive book to very plainly guide him along. If she was just playing a prank, then she could have teased Zagan all she wanted and knocked him down a peg with it.

"...Well, I was really worried about how to make Nephy happy. I guess... I'll give you my thanks for now," Zagan gave her his reply, scratching his head all the while.

Gremory stared back in surprise for a moment, and then broke out into laughter.

"There is no greater joy than my liege being pleased with me. After things are done here, you just want to run around singing praises of your love to your heart's content, huh? Keeheehee..."

"...Can it. Anyway, I'm entrusting the castle to you two."

"Leave it to us!"

The first time they fought, they were within Bifrons' domain atop the boat. However, this time around, it would be the opposite. Both the castle and town were Zagan's domain.

I won't let you steal anything from me here... Bifrons surely made

sufficient preparations, but no matter who it was, nobody had the right to steal what belonged to Zagan.

However, what Zagan, and even Bifrons, didn't yet know... was that there was one who slipped into his lands outside of their expectations.



“W-Welcome home, Master Zagan.”

After returning to the throne room, Zagan found Nephy waiting for him. He assumed she was stuck making preparations for dinner, but it seemed he was incorrect.

The fact that she's waiting for me here means that she has something she wants to talk about in private, right? If that were not the case, this girl would surely have waited for him at the castle's entrance. After observing Nephy's appearance one more time, he felt like she had something she wanted to talk about. She had her hands joined behind her back and was looking up at Zagan with a look of apprehension on her face. Her pointy ears were quivering about with a twitch with a somehow impatient yet nervous feeling to them.

Uh... the way she's reacting here doesn't mean she found out that I was making preparations for that date, right? Zagan had been keeping it a secret so that he could surprise her. He was in a real pickle if she suddenly found out about it.

“Wh-What's wrong Nephy? Wh-Why are you standing on ceremony like that?” Zagan called out to Nephy despite his nerves getting the best of him.

“Y-Yes, um... actually, there's something that I would like to give you...” Nephy pulled out a small package wrapped in paper and timidly held it out Zagan as she said that. It was tied together using a bright red ribbon and appeared quite charming.

Is this... what they call a present? Zagan had thought of preparing something himself after getting advice from Kuroka, but he hadn't yet thought about what to actually get Nephy yet. There was also the matter of Orias' pendant. And while Zagan was anguishing over all those thoughts, Nephy ended up beating him to the punch.

Wait, hold on. What am I supposed to do when I get a present from the girl I love? Was it something to put up as a decoration? Or wait, was it even something that could be preserved in the first place? He had gotten a flower wreath from Nephy when she turned tiny before, but at that time he was able to keep his composure and use sorcery to stagnate the flow of time to keep it from wilting.

However, this time around it was a different matter. Nephy was back to her usual age, back to the figure that Zagan fell in love with at first sight. The fact that she prepared a present for Zagan just felt like

it carried a different emotional weight to it. And so, all Zagan could do before that present was stand frozen in surprise.

Gaaah! Don't be so weak-willed, Zagan! How can a mighty Archdemon get agitated over such things every single time!? Gah! The ones who don't get agitated are the strange ones! Even the voice that usually rebuked him in his own mind gave up in an instant. No matter how he put it, this was the first present he ever received from the girl he loved. It was definitely impossible to maintain composure. And while he was shocked, standing there completely speechless, he suddenly noticed that Nephy was looking up at him anxiously.

Oh... That's right. I have to look inside!

Zagan cleared out his throat with a cough before speaking up.

"Umm, can I open it?"

"Please do."

Making sure not to damage the wrapping, since he wanted to keep it as a memento, he carefully unraveled it to find knit wool.

"Is this... a muffler?"

It was made of bright red wool and had intricate embroidery decorating its edges in golden thread. This was the first time Zagan ever held one in hand, but he did happen to spot some here and there in town.

"It may be unnecessary for you, since you can use sorcery, but it is starting to get cold outside. That's why I tried making this... thinking it might be of use to you," Nephy answered in a hushed voice.

"Wh-What...? This... is handmade!?" Zagan exclaimed, his eyes shooting open in shock upon hearing that.

"Yes."

"Um, not by sorcery or mysticism, but by knitting...?"

"Yes."

This wasn't something that could be done in one or two days through normal means, which meant she had been knitting it for quite some time. That stunning realization moved Zagan deeply. He had been concerned about the coming cold, but all he could think of was teaching her sorcery to deal with it. As the youngest Archdemon in history, it may have been a completely natural thought, but he did see plenty of winter clothing in town. And yet, why hadn't he been able to arrive at the same conclusion?

I suppose I'm still just a sorcerer at heart... Zagan became keenly aware that despite his hope of allowing Nephy to live under the light, he still had no real idea how that would look.

"Nephy. How... does one use this?" Zagan inquired as his thoughts arrived at a major problem. The people in town had them wrapped around their necks, but no matter what he tried, he couldn't really get it to work. It felt like he would strangle himself if he put too much

strength into his grip, which made him feel bad for the muffler. Having said that, if it was too slack, then it would just fall off right away. It also felt like the ends of the muffler were always too short. And so, with what looked like a charmed smile, Nephy picked up the muffler.

“Excuse me. You wrap it around like this,” Nephy said as she gently wrapped the muffler around Zagan’s neck and let the remaining ends of the muffler fall down his back.

“Hm... It’s quite warm.”

“Does it seem useful?”

“Yes. I like it. Thank you. I’ll treat it with care.”

“...I’m honored,” Nephy hung her head down and turned bright red right to the tips of her ears as she said that. And perhaps because of the cold, her hands, which she had held together in front of her chest, were also red.

Nephy must be cold in those clothes, right? I wonder if she’d be happy if I bought her some gloves... Zagan was unable to make gloves by hand, but he could cast sorcery on something that was already made to protect her from the cold. And with that thought, he finally felt like he found the answer to what he wanted to do on their date.

However, at that exact moment, thunder struck out from the pitch black sky.

“Oh no!”

It occurred right as all the tension in the room dissipated, so it surprised Nephy quite a bit. After letting out a short scream, she clung onto Zagan, who reflexively wrapped his arm around her waist. And despite it being through the apron, he could feel something soft pushing against him, leaving him quite shaken himself.

Now that I think of it, the weather was quite bad today... After Zagan started to think of other matters to try and calm down, he noticed that Nephy was trembling in his arms. Rather than being surprised by the lightning, it felt like she was trembling because of the cold.

“Hmm, Nephy, stay still.”

“Okay? Um, huh?”

Zagan gently carried Nephy like a princess, then sat down atop his throne. Following that, he undid the muffler around his neck partway and wrapped it around Nephy’s neck as well.

“Isn’t it warmer like this?”

“Yes... Um, it’s very... warm...” Nephy muttered, turning bright red once more as she trembling in an entirely different manner, leading Zagan to suddenly doubt his actions.

Wait... Wearing the same muffler while she sits on my lap... Isn’t this a situation where we have to stick really close to each other...? Zagan had just done something incredibly bold without even knowing it. And

while he was shocked by that revelation, Nephy leaned back against him. Her rapid heartbeat was passed through her chest to him, and Nephy pressed her slender fingers against Zagan's chest in an attempt to share the same feeling.

“...Your heartbeat is very fast, Master Zagan.”

“Y-Yours is too, Nephy.”

Reaffirming that they were in, fact, close enough to hear each others hearts, both of them began blushing.

“Should we... stay like this for a while?”

“...Yes.”

When Zagan stole a glance at Nephy's face, he could see her lips trembling as if she was stuck somewhere between shyness and relief. Tears were gradually forming in her eyes, but her hands were gripping onto Zagan's clothes tightly as if separating from him wasn't even a thought in her mind.



Nephy's become a fair bit more expressive lately... Even when she was expressionless, he could tell what she was thinking by watching her ears, but there really was a distinct charm to her displaying her emotions openly.

However, Zagan noticed a slight tinge of gloominess in Nephy's expression that was mixed in with all the joy.

I see. I guess she's still worried about Nephteros... The previous day, she had raised her doubts about whether it was really alright for her to be the only one who was happy, so he had to help put her mind at ease.

"Come to think of it, I went out to Kianoides today and met Chastille," Zagan said. The preparations for their date were naturally a secret, but on the surface, his main purpose for going was to have Chastille investigate the Thirteenth. Incidentally, he also managed to procure a picture book for Foll as well. Upon hearing her friend's name being mentioned, Nephy's expression brightened up just a bit.

"I see. Did she seem to be doing well?"

"As well as ever, at least. She seemed to be busy with all sorts of things, though. Anyway, I managed to find out something amusing."

"Something... amusing?" Nephy cocked her head to the side in confusion as she asked that question, and Zagan looked at her with as gentle a smile as he could manage.

"Seems Chastille is looking after Nephteros," Zagan gently said.

"Nephteros was with Chastille?" Nephy blinked with a blank gaze as she replied, having found that idea extremely surprising.

"The person in questions seems to want to keep it a secret, but yes."

"If it's a secret, how do you know?"

"Despite her best effort, she wasn't really able to hide it. I could tell right away without her even mentioning it."

"Thank goodness..." Nephy muttered as she raised her hand to her chest in relief.

"Mm. You trust Chastille quite a lot, huh?" Zagan inquired. He knew that the girls were good friends, but that that was still surprising.

"Chastille is the first person aside from me who truly understood you, Master Zagan. I'm sure she can save Nephteros too," Nephy nodded confidently as she said that.

Chastille understands me...? Zagan made a somewhat awkward face upon hearing that. Well, when they first met he did think that she was somewhat awkward, yet also a good person. Still, the portion of the girl that spurred on the desire to tease her was far more pronounced than anything else. And thanks to that, he just reflexively teased her

all the time. He wasn't really sure how any of that meant she understood him as a person.

"If we're talking about trust, then it seems you trust Chastille a fair bit as well, Master Zagan," Nephy muttered in a surprised tone.

"Hmm... is that so?" Zagan questioned that idea, though he quickly realized that he never really doubted Chastille either and said, "You're right. That may be the case. When it comes to protecting something, Chastille is quite capable. At least to the point where I can entrust my back to her, anyway."

"Yes," Nephy responded, nodding happily before puffing out her cheeks.

"...But, Master Zagan, you're talking about Chastille an awful lot right now."

"Aren't you doing the same, Nephy?"

"That's... true... but..." Nephy's voice trailed off. Rather than being a bad mood, she seemed somewhat lonely. Zagan couldn't tell why she was pouting all of a sudden. And after tilting his head to the side and thinking for a while, he was suddenly taken aback.

Huh, could this be that thing they call 'jealousy'? After taking a look at Nephy's face and ears, he could see that she was thinking, "I'm glad that you're praising my friend, but it's a depressing to hear you talk about another girl when we're finally alone together." Of course, he wanted to tell Nephy that she was the most important girl to him, but...

Mm. This is a refreshing sight... And so, he simply stared at her fixedly. Before long, Nephy surely thought that there was something strange about the way Zagan said nothing for a while, and looked up at him while still pouting. Their eyes met, and though she looked at him blankly, she immediately realized that he was gazing at her the entire time, which made her turn completely red and cover her cheeks.

"...Master Zagan, I doubt staring at my face is all that interesting..."

"I beg to differ."

"Huh!?"

Zagan reply was instantaneous, which made Nephy's eyes dart about in bewilderment. He then went on to talk about it with a serious expression.

"You hear me, Nephy? I, um... love you... I do believe I told you before."

"...You did."

"That's why, um, how do I put this? Um, it's only natural for me to gaze at your face, Nephy."

"...I see."

Even Zagan thought he was being a bit silly, but Nephy simply nodded in a completely meek manner. She was sitting with perfect posture, though perhaps that wasn't true because she was sitting on his lap. Still, sweat was running down her cheeks and her lips were trembling as if she was extremely shaken. Her azure eyes were darting about every which way, seemingly unable to decide what she should be looking at.

If you readily accept that, then I'm the one who'll be most embarrassed by it...!

Zagan cleared out his throat with a cough to try and hide his embarrassment.

"You may not have noticed it, but your expression has softened up quite a bit, Nephy. Enjoying that change is a precious pleasure of mine. Don't take that from me."

"...A-As you wish!"

Unable to bear it any longer, Nephy covered her face with both her hands. She then peeked up at Zagan through the gaps in her fingers.

"Um, Master Zagan. Have I started to... smile properly... I wonder...?"

Was Nephy also worrying about that? Zagan never thought such a question would cross Nephy's lips, so he'd been thrown for a loop.

"Hm... Well, what do you think?"

"Uh, um, I am practicing, but I'm not really confident that I can do it well..." Nephy began pulling on her blushing white cheeks as she spoke. Then, she used her two index fingers to lift up the corners of her mouth in an attempt to mold a smile. Her lips were certainly in the shape of one, but her gaze was perplexed, her behavior was clumsy, killing the illusion. Still, she was so earnest about it that Zagan felt a shock to his heart greater than any he had ever experienced before.

Stop! If you do something so criminally cute on top of my lap, then my heart won't be able to bear it! Even as he trembled violently, Zagan contemplated the matter. Back when Nephy was turned into a little girl, she was always smiling in a reserved manner. And so, he had never once witnessed her smiling wholeheartedly.

I kind of want to see Nephy practicing her smiles, to be honest...

"I wonder about that. I said this before, but your expressions have been gradually changing, Nephy. The way you smile with all your heart may not necessarily be the same as what I think it looks like, right?"

"Th-Then, what should I do...?"

"For the time being, try showing me that practice of yours," Zagan responded with a smile.

“Huh...?” Nephy mumbled, frozen in place.

“Um, um, Master Zagan, that’s... um... really just a bit too... embarrassing...” Nephy answered him properly, though her voice got quieter and quieter as she went on. However, upon seeing such a cute reaction, Zagan lost control of his actions.

“...Hmm. I see. That’s a shame. Sorry. That was unreasonable of me,” Zagan said as he slumped his shoulders and made a face like he was in utter despair, leading Nephy to begin stammering in a fluster.

“U-U-Under... Understood. Even if I’m unable to do it well... could you please not laugh?”

“Do you think I would ever laugh at you, Nephy?”

“...You often laugh when you see me troubled by something...”

Oh, come on. My face just loosens up when I see something cute, I swear! Zagan was at a loss for words as the realization that Nephy had seen right through him dawned on him. He felt like it was a completely unreasonable demand, but when he really thought of it, Zagan was the one who always thrust unreasonable demands at her. Every time he wondered why he was doing that to the girl he loved, he always ended up recalling just how cute she looked when she was trying her best to meet expectations. And seeing her try her very best once more, Zagan nodded resolutely.

“Understood. I promise not to laugh this time.”

“...Okay.”

Having her path of retreat cut off, Nephy drooped her shoulders. Next, she took in a deep breath a few times over, then snapped her eyes open.

“Here I go!” Nephy proclaimed before using all her might to form a smile. She held her hands at the side of her lips, tilted her head to the side slightly, narrowed her eyes, and gently opened her mouth a little. The smile was reminiscent of the little Nephy from the hidden elven village.

“Wh-What!?”

Before he even knew it, Zagan embraced Nephy. Her eyes began darting about like she had no idea what was going on.

“U-Um, um...”

“...Oh, um... It was... really, really cute.”

“Uh, what?”

After hearing his honest opinion, Nephy began squirming around in his arms wildly. Her ears were also shaking up and down violently, exposing her inner turmoil. And then, after seemingly exhausting all her strength, she gave up.

“That’s... the first time... you said something like that, Master Zagan...” Nephy muttered as she went limp in his arms.

“Huh, is that so?”

It was certainly true that he always agonized about how cute she was in his mind, but he couldn't recall ever saying it aloud.

Am I able to properly say it now that we're in a real relationship? If that was the case, he had to properly tell her everything he was unable to before. And so, Zagan gently brushed Nephy's head as he spoke.

"You may be at ease. I've had that thought in my mind since I first laid eyes on you."

Nephy's pointy ears shot up straight with enough vigor that it felt like they made a snapping sound, and her face flushed red right to the very tip of those ears. After a short while, she looked up at Zagan with tears in the corner of her eyes. Their hearts were beating furiously. And in that moment, her pink lips captured his focus. Their faces drew closer completely with every passing second. And then, just as their lips were about to meet...

"Yowch!"

Someone collapsed into the throne room with a thud. Zagan and Nephy jumped up and tried to separate from each other, but that wasn't possible because of the muffler tied around their necks. The two of them staggered, then ended up in a state where they were embracing.

"Eh, eheh, eheheh..."

The one who raised their voice with sweat tumbling down their face... was none other than the siren servant, Selphy.

Dammit! How dare you intrude just when it was getting good!?

Upon taking a closer look, Zagan noticed that Gremory, Kimaris, Raphael, and even Foll, who had her eyes covered by Raphael, were all there behind her. It just may have been that the thunder that struck with such good timing was their doing.

"You bastards... What the hell are you doing there?"

Zagan stood up with Nephy still in his arms, which made all of them scatter in an attempt to escape his wrath. However, there was no way he would just laugh it off and let them go. And so, he dashed around the castle with Nephy firmly pressed into his body as she hid her face in embarrassment.



"Where... am I...?" Nephteros spoke in a hoarse voice as she regained consciousness. When she opened her eyes, she found an unfamiliar ceiling stretching out above her. It was a dim and narrow ceiling. However, it appeared to be well taken care of. The shadows in the room on the ceiling swayed about, so she could tell that the room was lit with candles. It seemed to be evening, and she appeared to be in a bed within a small room.

“Are you awake?”

When she turned over to look at the source of that dignified voice, she found a girl with red hair sitting down next to the bed. It was a face that she was familiar with, and it pulled on her memories. If she remembered correctly, this girl’s name was Chastille. She was one of the servants of Archdemon Zagan. Even though she was an Angelic Knight, she was a fainthearted girl who clung to a sorcerer like Nephteros in tears. Yet somehow, she was the wielder of a Sacred Sword, and Nephteros recalled that she was quite powerful when she gripped said sword. Perhaps because it was evening, she wasn’t wearing her Anointed Armor, but was instead in a blue uniform. Her Sacred Sword was standing up against the chair next to her.

Hm, why am I here with this crybaby...? Her thoughts were muddled because she had just woken up. Her body felt like lead, and she didn’t feel like she could even raise her arm. As she remained stuck in place, dumbfounded, Chastille held out a cup to her with a worried look on her face.

“Are you alright? Would you like some water?”

Nephteros realized that her throat was unusually parched when she heard that offer.

“It’d be better for you to drink little by little,” Chastille said as she supported her head to sit her up a little, then put the cup to her lips. It was somewhat irritating that only a little at a time was pouring into her mouth, but thanks to that, her throat wasn’t in pain.

What a considerate girl... Now that she thought of it, this girl was the first one to leap in immediately to protect Nephteros when she had celestial mysticism fired at her back at the hidden elven village. Even though it happened just a few days ago, it felt strangely nostalgic. And upon thinking that, Nephteros finally remembered what had happened to her.

“Wait, where is it!? What happened to that chimera!?”

“Calm down. We drove the chimera away for now. My subordinates are in pursuit, but they haven’t found its tracks yet,” Chastille explained. Hearing that, Nephteros tried to get up, but was pushed back into bed by Chastille, who attempted to reassure her by saying, “You’re safe as long as you stay here, so rest for now.”

Nephteros shouldn’t have believed in such words, but they were somehow relieving to hear.

“It seems your fever has gone down. Still, it looks like you’ve lost quite a bit of strength. I think it would be better for you to sleep some more,” Chastille said as she gently touched Nephteros’ forehead.

“...Why? Why... did you save me? Was it Zagan’s order?”

Nephteros muttered in a bewildered tone.

“Maybe I should start by showing my gratitude first. Thank you

for protecting my precious subordinates. If you weren't there, I would have lost all of them," Chastille said, looking back at Nephteros in wonder, then smiling as if admonishing her.

"I... didn't save... them..."

The image of the Angelic Knights who tried to save her getting killed one after the other came to mind.

If I didn't come here, none of them would have died... It was strange to be thanked even though she had caused all those deaths. And yet, Chastille shook her head.

"You saved them. Even though you could have run away, you stood firm right there and fought back, didn't you? That's why I must thank you as the representative of the Angelic Knights."

"You're Chastille, right? The one who's Zagan's servant...?" Nephteros asked as she looked up at her face like she couldn't believe it.

"No, I cooperate with him, but I'm not a servant or anything, got it?"

"...The image of you in my memories and the one I see right now don't really match..."

Chastille was acting so different that Nephteros even suspected that she was an impostor.

"Good grief... First Barbatos and now you. Seriously, what do you people think of me? All it means is that I conduct myself differently when I'm on the job," Chastille slumped her shoulders as she said that.

Aren't you practically a completely different person...?

"Going back to the original topic, the fact that I... no, we saved you, has nothing to do with Zagan. We simply saved someone who we thought ought to be saved."

"Aren't you all Angelic Knights? Is it fine for you to leave sorcerers alive?"

"Angelic Knights aren't just murderers... Although, well, there's all sorts of factions within the church. I'm part of the faction who wants to live alongside sorcerers... Or rather, I've been entrusted with leading it."

That was a surprise. Based on Nephteros' knowledge, Chastille's words were enough for the Inquisition to give her the noose.

"I'm surprised... you've managed to survive..."

"Well, they've tried to kill me a few times now, but all of that has come to an end."

Then they really did try to kill you... Nephteros felt like she understood why Zagan kept Chastille by his side.

It feels like if you leave this girl alone, she'll end up dead by the next day... Why was a sudden desire to protect her bubbling up within Nephteros? They didn't really talk much back at the hidden elven

village, but this girl really did feel like someone who would vanish the moment she was left on her own.

“Still, the reason I’m able to think this way now is thanks to Zagan. That man saved me despite the fact he knew I was from the church, and he never asked for anything in return. I think that’s what shaped my beliefs,” Chastille said as she formed a bashful smile. Her cheeks were flushed, and her joyous expression seemed oddly dazzling to Nephtheros.

Is she...? After thinking it over for a while, Nephtheros arrived at an answer.

“Are you... in love with Zagan?”

“Buhyaa!?” Chastille let out an incomprehensible scream and quickly jumped to her feet. Thanks to that, Nephtheros was finally convinced that the girl before her was the same person from the hidden elven village.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What kind of shameless drivel are you spouting!?”

“Did I say anything strange?” Nephtheros cocked her head to the side as she asked that question, and Chastille turned beet red as she hung her head. It looked almost like steam would start billowing out her ears at any moment.

“I-I... don’t really... know myself,” Chastille replied. And then, after looking around to see if anyone else was listening in, she asked, “Um, though it’s somewhat pathetic, could you maybe hear me out?”

“Well, I guess...?”

Honestly speaking, Nephtheros had no idea why they were suddenly on this topic, but she wasn’t able to get out of bed anyway. It was a good distraction, if nothing else. Chastille tangled her fingers together, then began muttering out a few words at a time.

“At first, um, even though he was a man who most claimed was a vicious and inhuman sorcerer, I found him strangely lonely-looking and was somewhat concerned... Moreover, he ended up saving me multiple times... Um, and after thinking about it, my heart also... throbs. Is this... really something... different from simple respect?”

If that didn’t describe a girl in love, then what else could? Her reaction was practically a textbook example. Nephtheros was completely astonished by that fact, yet Chastille shook her head.

“But he has Nephy, right? I want the two of them to be happy. I mean, haven’t both of them suffered enough? There’s no way I can get in the way of their happiness...”

Nephtheros recalled the image of Nephelia she saw in the crystal ball where she was being abused in the hidden elven village. Upon seeing that, even she once wanted to save that girl.

All of that definitely happened to her... Plus, when Zagan

nonchalantly reminisced about his childhood, it was full of ghastly stories. Due to that, Nephteros also understood the feeling of wanting the two of them to be rewarded for putting up with all that.

"That's why... even if these feelings are more than respect, I think I should keep quiet and carry it with me to the grave."

"How foolish..." Nephteros bluntly refuted her.

"You might be right," Chastille replied with a strained smile.

"...Have you ever thought that you're also someone who should be rewarded with happiness?"

"You're... unexpectedly kind, huh?" Chastille said as she stared back at Nephteros in wonder.

"Whatever..." Nephteros averted her gaze as she said that, which made Chastille cheerfully giggle.

"We've talked plenty about me. What about you?"

Nephteros' body shook with a start. Chastille likely wanted to at least hear why she was being chased by Bifrons' chimera. However, honestly speaking, Nephteros didn't want to tell her... Or rather, she couldn't yet tell her. The answer she received from Archdemon Orias and the discovery she made due to that revelation were far too heavy for Nephteros to bear. It was to the point where she raised the flag of rebellion against her master Bifrons. If Nephteros were to put it into words, she would surely break down into tears.

"Even you were saved by Zagan, right? And after that, you ended up mending his mantle back to such a pretty state. You wouldn't have done that for just anyone, right?" Chastille's words were completely unexpected.

"Ah, that...?" Nephteros muttered, feeling relieved by the anticlimactic turn, and then said, "Let's see... I am thankful that he saved me, and I also respect him. Plus, he also listened to my troubles without laughing at me, and answered me sincerely. I won't deny that I've at least thought that it would have been nice if he was my master."

"Then..."

"But, I think it's different."

He was strict like a teacher, reliable like father, and kind like an older brother. Having said that, it wasn't like they were that far apart in age. If nothing else, Nephteros truly believed that living by his side would bring her much joy.

Oh, I see. To me, he's...

"I probably... think of him... as a big brother," Nephteros whispered while still pale in the face. It was the first time she felt the warmth of something like family. That was what Nephteros felt from Zagan.

"...Wow, how cute," Chastille stared at her in wonder for a

moment, then muttered in disbelief.

“Huh?”

Had Chastille’s tastes been twisted because her love for Zagan couldn’t be fulfilled? After Nephteros sensed danger to her well being, Chastille finally came to her senses, and shook her head in a fluster.

“N-No! You’re misunderstanding!” Chastille screamed, as she then cleared her throat with a cough and continued, “Um, I’m not Gremory, but it’s like I get the feeling of wanting to protect you... Anyway, I don’t mean it in a weird way. I wouldn’t feel that way toward someone of the same sex.”

“I wonder...” Nephteros looked at Chastille with a cold gaze, which made Chastille attempt to change the subject.

“I may not have a right to tell you this, but is that really how you feel? I mean, it’s possible to fall in love with someone you think of as an older brother, right?”

If you really think that, then treat your own feelings with more care... Chastille’s behavior exasperated Nephteros, making her want to talk about herself just a little.

“I probably... won’t live long enough to fall in love.”

“Huh...? Wh-What do you mean!?” Chastille yelled, completely taken aback.

“I’m... a little tired...” Nephteros said as she closed her eyes, cutting off Chastille.

Do I actually want her to hear my story...? Even though Chastille assured her she would be safe, Nephteros didn’t believe that she would survive very long with Bifrons hot on her tail. That was probably why she wanted Chastille to know more about her.

Unfortunately, by the time she came to that realization, Nephteros had already fallen back into the land of sleep.



Nephteros had fallen asleep in only a few seconds.

What did she mean just now...? Chastille shivered at the thought of her terrifying words. She continued to stare at Nephteros’ face as she slept. She didn’t sense it much while they were talking, but she and Nephy really were two peas in a pod. Even Chastille held doubts as to whether it was truly a coincidence that those two girls had the same face.

After a while, Chastille parted the bangs covering Nephteros’ face. When she first met this girl, Nephteros was arrogant and aggressive, but after talking to her, Chastille found that she was a kind girl who was just a little obstinate.

What kind of Unification Faction would we be if we didn’t protect this girl? Rather than prying into her affairs, she wanted to protect

Nephteros. Chastille picked up her Sacred Sword and got up off her seat. Nephteros had regained consciousness already, so for the time being, it seemed that there was no immediate danger to her anymore. It was probably best to let her sleep peacefully.

“So you’ve returned, Alfred,” Chastille said upon finding a familiar face waiting for her in her office. He was one of the Knights of the Azure Sky that she entrusted with pursuing the chimera. Alfred remained silent as he returned a salute with a snap. The reason he didn’t raise his voice was likely out of consideration for the injured party resting in the nap room.

“Good work out there this late into the evening. Take a seat for now,” Chastille said as she pointed over to a chair.

“Thank you very much, ma’am.”

As one would expect, Alfred was unable to conceal his fatigue and took a seat. Next, he looked over to Chastille’s hand.

“Were you in the middle of reading?”

“It’s nothing all that important. I was just looking into Lord Clavwell’s records.”

“His Eminence the Cardinal’s records...?”

That man was the individual who attempted to assassinate Chastille. Alfred’s expression clouded over upon hearing that, and Chastille nodded.

“There’s a possibility that man was involved with the shadier aspects of the church, so I’m investigating it a little.”

“The dark side...” Alfred made a grim expression as he muttered those words.

“...Do you know anything about it?” Chastille inquired. Honestly speaking, she didn’t want to believe that an organization of assassins existed within the church. She was looking into it while praying that Zagan was going overboard, but with what Alfred just said...

“I have heard about it before,” Alfred answered, in a gruff tone before continuing with, “There is a force gathered together of tight-lipped, especially strong Angelic Knights. On the surface, they are an elite force who are meant to subjugate the Archdemons, but there are no official records of their activities.”

That being the case, a dark side existed whether or not Clavwell was actually involved with it.

But is there really a Thirteenth? Despite not being able to take down an Archdemon, the power of a Sacred Sword was tremendous. If there was a Sacred Sword that did not officially exist, a force that possessed it would have most likely exercised their authority more openly.

The chimera alone is enough of a headache, and now this... Chastille shook her head in frustration.

“Thank you. That’s valuable information... How is your

investigation going?"

"Ma'am. The chimera has continued its escape to the north of the forest and seems to have jumped into a canal. We believe it has most likely gone downstream, but it was impossible to pursue it any further."

"Quite a clever chimera, isn't it? Should we assume the owner is nearby?"

"If it were a normal sorcerer, then that would be correct, but I doubt any ordinary sorcerer could have created that thing."

This was a worry on Chastille's mind as well.

That chimera seems a lot like the Sludge Demon Lord from the boat... According to Zagan, the culprit behind the chimera was Bifrons, who seemed like the type to be more than willing to unleash it within the city. There was a need to tighten their watch.

How many people do we have who could even stand against it? The patrol that was decimated in the afternoon was not filled with unskilled troops. They were all Angelic Knights who counted among the strongest in Kianoides. However, six of them together were unable to even scratch the chimera. If people of their strength were out, then only Chastille and the three knights could actually fight the thing, which was downright impossible.

"I think we should devote ourselves to defense. How about you?"

"...In my opinion, it is dangerous. Sure, we can control the damage to the city, but if we disperse our forces, then we'll be spread thin if it attacks us. Also, as long as the owner stays at large, there is a high probability that they will simply throw in another one of the same type."

"Zagan told me that he would deal with them. I trust him to keep his word."

"Archdemon Zagan, you say? Is it really alright to trust him? Even Lord Raphael put his trust in that scoundrel..." Alfred had a frustrated expression on his face.

Raphael's case was something that was hidden even inside the church. The only one within the church who knew for sure that he was still alive was Chastille. However, the three knights had been her subordinates for quite some time now. They noticed that Raphael was living under the patronage of Zagan during their time with her. Alfred was lamenting that fact, and Chastille returned him an ambiguous smile.

"Lord Raphael is far too awkward. If you're going to say that, then wouldn't it be better to say it was good fortune? At the very least, I think it's something to be happy about."

Raphael somehow looked far more lively at Zagan's castle than as an Angelic Knight. With the number of sorcerers there multiplying, he

had many people depending on him now, and it seemed they'd even accepted his easy to misunderstand personality.

"Even so, Lord Raphael was called the most dreadful of the Archangels. Is this situation really fine?" Alfred asked, his expression growing more frustrated by the minute.

Chastille understood what he was trying to say. Currently, Raphael was serving as a butler at a sorcerer's castle. Not only that, but it was an Archdemon's castle. The Archangels were a group that all Angelic Knights looked up to, so it was difficult to accept him heading off into his retirement like that.

"Get used to it, Alfred. It's what he wants," Chastille said in an admonishing tone.

"Getting used to it seems like a bad idea to me..."

"You three serve under me, so you may meet the same fate someday, you know?"

The three knights understood that being part of the Unification Faction put them in an extremely perilous position. They also knew they were in a position where they could be assassinated at any moment. When that came to be, even if they were to survive it, they would lose their place in the church. In that case, about the only place they could live would be under Zagan's protection. She had suggested that half-jokingly, but Alfred was completely taken aback.

"I'd rather not."

"Then do your best to avoid that."

If Raphael's whereabouts were revealed, they would most likely be forced to endure unspeakable interrogation methods at the hands of the church. It was better not to bring up his name at all.

"It was a slip of the tongue. Do forgive me," Alfred apologized, then pinned down his mouth and bowed his head.

"It's fine. More importantly, we don't know when the chimera will show up again. Take this chance to get a sufficient amount of rest."

"Ma'am! Do take care of yourself, Lady Chastille," Alfred saluted as he said that, then left the room. And after seeing him off, Chastille leaned against the back of her chair.

This really is tiring... The moment she thought her mountain of paperwork from the last few days had finally vanished, the uproar with the chimera began. As a result, she hadn't even met the new priest, Kuroka. As she pinched the corners of her eyes, a laughing rang out from her shadow.

"Heeheeheee, weren't you all just having a dangerous talk just now?"

"You mean about Lord Raphael? Well, it definitely isn't something we should mention in this place."

"It'd sound like you're all happy he's dead to those who don't

know what's going on, you know?"

Looking back on her own conduct, Chastille found that he had a point. Still, she shook her head to deny his words.

"Quit spouting nonsense. Alfred understands the situation. I'm not doing anything that might cause misunderstandings, okay?"

"Well that's fine and all, but... Ugh, whatever. More importantly, about Zagan."

"Oh, you contacted him, right? You have my thanks."

Zagan was already aware of the chimera when he visited in the afternoon. Moreover, it seemed that he didn't hear about Nephteros and Chastille believed that things had ended without him finding out, too.

"After talking about you, he got all fired up. Seems he's seriously gonna try and kill Bifrons," Barbatos said from the shadows with a chuckle.

"Huh...? I know that they're enemies, but why is he so angry?"

"Who knows? Maybe cause his little pet got attacked?"

"Huh? Little pet? You don't mean..."

Does he mean... me? It was true that he only had eyes for Nephy, but did he really care enough about Chastille to get that angry? Her face got hot as that thought came to mind, and Nephteros' words came back to her.

Have you ever thought that you're also someone who should be rewarded with happiness? Yes, Nephteros truly was a kind girl.

No, I can't even imagine snuggling up to Zagan... Nephy would definitely have been around to witness any opportunity she had, which would have left Chastille feeling guilty. That was why she wasn't convinced she was in love.

Just what is this feeling...? And while she mused over such thoughts, her eyelids came down.

"Hey... crybaby...? Oh, she fell asleep..."

Chastille thought she could hear Barbatos' voice from far off, but her consciousness had already slipped away. And at that exact moment...

"Outta the way!"

Blood flew across the office that Chastille was supposedly alone in.



Barbatos pulled Chastille's chair aside, making her tumble to the ground in a flashy manner.

"Wh-What are you doing!?" Chastille began reproaching Barbatos for interrupting her rest, but a warm splash of liquid flew across her face. And then, something tumbled on the ground right before her

eyes. It was an arm. And not her own, but that of a man.

“B-Barbatos!” Chastille roared. Upon closer inspection, she noticed that he had come out of the shadows, and was squatting down with a missing arm.

“GAAAAAAAAAAH! You fucking bastard!” Barbatos screamed, glaring at a bizarre shadow all the while. The figure was wearing a pitch-black robe like that of a sorcerer. They didn’t appear to be tall or short, but because they were hunched over and covered by the robe, their actual physique, and even their race, couldn’t be determined. That figure reminded her of how Valefor used to look.

If there was something that stood out about their appearance, then it was the bizarre mask they were wearing. It was pure white as if made of porcelain, but it had nothing resembling eyes or a mouth. The entire mask had the symbol of the church, a cross, engraved across it. Additionally, there were countless needle-sized holes spotted all over the mask, which were likely used to see through it. However, a mask with no semblance of a face was still quite offputting.

There’s a cross, so does that mean this is someone from the church...? That seemed likely, but their ominous presence was strange. The eerie assailant was holding a short sword in each hand in an underhanded grip. Blood was trickling down both blades, and Chastille finally came to her senses.

“Fall back, Barbatos!” Chastille yelled out while reaching out to pick up her fallen Sacred Sword. Unfortunately, the assailant’s mask appeared right before her eyes before she got the chance. It was close enough for her nose to touch the mask. She hadn’t even gotten her hand on the grip, yet they had closed the distance already.

“Collusion with a sorcerer discovered. Archangel Chastille Lillqvist has been deemed a traitor.”

A muffled voice came from the other side of the mast. However, it had no emotion to it. It spoke in a completely robotic voice, which sounded like the tone that came from those golems sorcerers created, as the short swords in their hands closed in on Chastille’s throat.

Fast!? Without her her Anointed Armor and Sacred Sword, Chastille was just an ordinary human girl. There was no way she could react to such speed.

“Tch! Such a pain in the ass!”

The moment she heard that voice, a hand stretched out from behind Chastille and pulled her down. She didn’t feel any impact against the ground, but let out a sound as if splashing into water. Her vision blacked out, and by the time it returned, the assailant’s back was in front of her eyes. Barbatos stood next to her, wheezing and out of breath, likely because he used sorcery to swap their positions. This time, Chastille properly brandished her Sacred Sword.

“Ugh, who are you!?”

The masked assailant inclined their head with a stiff motion akin to a tin puppet.

“Special Enforcement Squad Thirteen... Azazel. I’m under direct command of the pope.”

Chastille’s eyes shot open upon hearing that name.

Azazel... Isn’t that the name of the Thirteenth Sacred Sword that Zagan mentioned? Did that mean the assailant possessed a Sacred Sword? The short swords in their hands appeared to be sharp blades, but they didn’t look like Sacred Swords. They named themselves as under direct command of the pope, so they were surely an extremely special existence even within the church.

And they were sent over to kill me? The Unification Faction most definitely opposed the pope’s will, but that still seemed like a bit much. And just then, noisy footsteps could be heard approaching the door to the office.

“Lady Chastille! What is going on!?”

“Ugh, the door won’t open. Is it a sorcerer attack!?”

It seemed that some sort of trick was set up on the door. The knights who were stationed outside the office were ramming the door, but it showed no signs of opening. Moreover, the assailant showed no worry, clearly intending not to leave while Chastille was still alive.

Chastille took a keen look around the area. There was a dark red puddle forming under Barbatos, since he had already lost an arm. He likely had no time to use sorcery to regenerate it at the moment. He may have been able to at least run away, but there no chance of him helping in a fight. This office also wasn’t all that spacious. It was far too cramped for Chastille to brandish her Sacred Sword. On the other hand, the assailant used short swords and was fast enough to close the distance between them in an instant. Chastille had a hunch that she would be decapitated if she even so much as blinked.

Still, that’s no reason for me to give up... After calming her nerves, Chastille propped her Sacred Sword up onto her shoulder and held it with a loose grip.

“Barbatos. Bear with it a bit. This will be over soon,” Chastille claimed as she stared right at the assailant.

“Shine — Azrael!” Chastille barked as her Sacred Sword emitted a dazzling light. She had no intention of using the Sacred Sword’s aura to cut down a human opponent. Nevertheless, the light fired out by her sword was capable of snatching away the assailant’s vision. On the other hand, the light didn’t burn Chastille’s eyes, since her sword was hoisted up on her shoulder behind her head. Using that small window of opportunity, she swung the flat of the blade at Azazel.

I got them now... Or so she thought, but...

“I see. Smart.”

The assailant wasn't where Chastille had brought down her sword. They were clinging to the ceiling, looking down at Chastille through their eerie mask.

They read my move? Chastille was a public figure. When it came to the church, it was possible to investigate the powers of her Sacred Sword and her personal skills. It wasn't all that strange for all her capabilities to be studied. However, knowing about them and being able to deal with them were entirely different matters.

This is a tough opponent...! When it came to sheer sword skills, it was possible that the assailant matched both her and Raphael. They weren't an opponent she could take in alive. Chastille slid her left hand down her hilt and gripped it properly to swing it at full strength. And at the same time, the assailant came down from the ceiling.

“HAAA!” Chastille swung her sword horizontally, aiming for the moment they landed, as she let that war cry loose. Unfortunately, the assailant simply matched that with their short sword and rotated in midair.

They parried a Sacred Sword in midair!? That feat wasn't something that could be done with sheer skill. They were likely wearing Anointed Armor under their robes, but their reflexes were already beyond the realm of humans.

Chastille hoisted her grip and pulled back her Sacred Sword. And as they landed, the assailant's other short sword came soaring in. Dazzling sparks fell down in front of Chastille's eyes. The short sword drilled into the small gap between Chastille's hands, hitting right into the Sacred Sword's hilt. If she was off by just an inch, she would have lost her fingers or even her neck.

She felt a cold sensation run down her spine, but she didn't waver. There was no way she could. If she wavered for even an instant, she would be cut down.

If I don't counterattack, I'll be driven into a corner.

“YAAA!” Chastille let out a roar and pushed back the short sword using sheer strength. Perhaps because the assailant didn't have much physical strength, they staggered and bent backward. And before they could correct their posture, Chastille took a swing in from below.

However, the slash that should have caught their flank was dodged as the assailant lowered right to the floor. They were supple movements, much like that of a snake. With the jump from earlier and that dodge just now, their superhuman movement reminded Chastille of the chimera from the afternoon.

Chastille continued to swing her Sacred Sword, but because of the cramped room, she wasn't able to fully brandish it and her strikes came out weak, failing to even graze the assailant. On the other hand,

the assailant's attacks with the short swords all aimed precisely at Chastille's vitals, forcing her gradually into a defensive battle.

The office was far too cramped for her to be able to wield her Sacred Sword without Anointed Armor. The situation was far too disadvantageous. Not only that, but she had an injured person behind her and Nephteros in the next room that she had to protect. If she were to retreat, the two of them would be killed.

"TAAA!" Chastille slammed her sword into her office table with a cry. A boisterous sound broke out, and the shattered wood rained down on the assailant.

"Ugh!?"

As one would expect, they were unable to dodge all the fragments. The assailant huddled down onto the ground and endured the downpour. However, Chastille felt a sense of unease there.

What the? It looked like they stopped moving for a moment there? Would someone who was able to dodge an attack from outside their field of vision really waver in the face of such a cheap trick? Having said that, Chastille had no time to think about it. She used that chance to cut into a sofa. However, the assailant wasn't so dim-witted that they would fall for the same attack twice. After leaping backward a great distance, they escaped the fragments of the sofa.

I got you! The wall's back there! It was a small office, so if they were pushed back all the way to the wall, then there was no way for them to escape the Sacred Sword range. The assailant's back collided with the wall, and their movements... didn't come to a stop.

"Huh...?"

The assailant twisted in midair and landed on the wall feet first. Chastille was left staring wide-eyed at those movements, which made it seem like they had eyes on the back of their head. And having swung in expecting an opening, Chastille was the one who completely exposed herself to an attack. The assailant kicked off the wall and closed in like an arrow.

"Gra—"

And in the next instant, their short swords closed in on her neck. *I'm done for.*

"...Tch, you're such a pain in the ass, crybaby."

The moment she thought she would be cut down, a large back obstructed her vision.

"Barbatos!"

The short sword plunged into Barbatos' stomach.

"Heehee, finally got you!" Barbatos grabbed the arm and kept the short sword stuck inside him, but the assailant had two swords. The other sword came down into his shoulder. However, instead of crying out in pain, Barbatos merely laughed.

“Clean out your fucking ears and hear me! I’m Barbatos! One of the ex-Archdemon candidates, Purgatory Barbatos! Eat this, you shithead... The Fourth Rank of Purgatory, Flames of Indignation!”

Flames of Indignation was powerful sorcery that was comparable to a dragon’s breath. It was also the sorcery that Barbatos fired off against Archdemon Orias the other day. Glowing mana gathered in front of him as he howled.

“Ugh, let me go!”

The assailant stabbed Barbatos multiple times, but he had a vice-like grip on their arm, leaving them unable to escape. And then, a heat ray was fired out that burned everything to a crisp. The ray burst through the wall and reduced the interior of the office to ash. The strike was even powerful enough to incinerate the atmosphere and didn’t even leave behind a single flame.

“How’s that, you asshole? Aren’t I... strong...?” Barbatos collapsed as he spoke. By the time the flash dissipated, the assailant was nowhere in sight.

Did he get them? Or did they get away? Chastille searched for the assailant’s presence, but couldn’t sense them anywhere nearby. Deeming the threat gone, she rushed over to Barbatos.

“Barbatos, hang in there!” Chastille exclaimed, propping him up in a panic. On top of losing an arm, he had been stabbed many times over. It felt like even a sorcerer of Barbatos’ level couldn’t survive that. Chastille had turned pale, and glass fragments came tumbling down from Barbatos’ body.

“What the... Is this glass? No, crystal...?”

It was likely that the many amulets Barbatos had around his neck had broken. Luckily, it seemed his wounds weren’t all the deep, and there weren’t that many of them either. He looked to be in pain, but was still properly breathing. And as she picked up those fragments, a voice called out to her from nearby.

“It seems... they ran away...”

After turning toward the familiar voice, she could see that the door to the nap room was partway open, and a dark elf girl was crouching on the ground, leaning against it.

“Nephteros, is it fine for you to be up?”

“Does that really matter... when there’s such a ruckus going on right next to me...?”

In truth, she seemed to have crawled out of bed to come and help, yet Nephteros’ voice implied that she didn’t even have the strength to stand up. Chastille then remembered that Nephteros specialized in celestial mysticism that manipulated crystals.

“Could it be that you protected Barbatos?”

“I couldn’t... block all of it. If you don’t treat him quickly... he’ll

die...”

We may be able to save him. The moment she thought that the door behind her finally opened.

“Lady Chastille!”

“Ugh, what happened here...!?”

“An assassination attempt! Track them down!”

The ones who burst in were the three knights led by Alfred. Reassured by their presence, Chastille was finally able to let go of her Sacred Sword.



“This should at least keep him alive...” Nephteros said as she finished treating Barbatos.

“I’d say it’ll help more than that...”

It likely wasn’t sorcery, but mysticism. Nephteros herself seemed to be downplaying her abilities, though, as even his dismembered arm was reconnected, and his deathly pale face had regained color. Not only that, but the shadows that were always around his eyes had vanished, and he looked healthier than normal.

Nephteros let out a tired sigh, and leaned back against the wall. Chastille then fell to her knees next to her.

“Sorry. You should also be lying down and resting, but...”

“...That’s not true,” Nephteros said as she slowly shook her head. Then, she continued, “You said before that the hidden elven village was like a sanctuary of the church, right? It seems that we high elves have affinity with such places. I’m recovering faster than usual here.”

It didn’t really change the fact that it would be difficult for her to stand up and walk around, but it could also be said that the pain in her breath had receded.

“That’s why... I’m saying... this is nothing special... I think... there’s more... I can do,” Nephteros said as she timidly looked up at Chastille.

“Huh...? Meaning?” Chastille cocked her head to the side as she asked her to explain more, and Nephteros averted her gaze while blushing.

“You sure are bad at sensing things. I’m saying there are other injured people... Um, the survivors... are here, right? Like... the ones who saved me in the forest...”

With that, Chastille finally understood that she was volunteering to treat the wounded Angelic Knights.

Despite being the polar opposite of Nephy, she may be similar to her in this regard... Though she felt that way, she still thought it was a little different.

Oh, I see. This girl is a lot like him... He was blunt, curt, haughty,

and acted like humans were garbage. And yet, he was more sympathetic than anyone else.

Back then, I was a coward who couldn't do anything despite wanting to save him... As a result, Chastille was the one who always ended up relying on him. If she didn't worry about her own appearance at the time, held out her hand to him, and embraced him, then right now, she may have been the one by his side. And with a sudden thump in her chest, she found her answer.

"...I see. That's how it is."

"Huh...? What are— Eek!" Nephteros looked at her with a curious expression, and Chastille embraced her. She didn't want to regret her actions ever again. She truly believed that this girl was someone that had to be saved.

"Allow me to give you my heartfelt thanks for your offer. Please save my precious subordinates."

"D-Didn't I say it's no big deal!?"

"It's a big deal to me," Chastille said as she squeezed Nephteros even more tightly.

"The one who is here, the person who saved both me and Barbatos, and is now offering to save my subordinates, is none other than you, Nephteros," Chastille said, pouring her emotions and gratitude into her voice while gently brushing Nephteros' beautiful silver hair. Then, she said, "Remember this. If you ever need help, then I'll definitely be here for you. No matter what it costs, I'll protect you."

"...You're exaggerating." Nephteros muttered. However, as she looked up at Chastille's face, she was completely taken aback. Confused by what she saw, she asked, "Are you... crying?"

"Huh? Oh, you're right," Chastille concluded. Before she knew it, her cheeks were wet. However, it wasn't a bad feeling. And so, Chastille put on a crisp smile.

"Please don't worry about it. This just means I've noticed my own unrequited love."



Yes. A long time ago, the man she loved was in pain. At that time, even when she was thrown out, rejected, and hurt, Nephy didn't care about her own appearance and tried to save Zagan. On the other hand, Chastille was unable to cast away her position as a wielder of a Sacred Sword or her title as an Archangel to do the same.

Everything was already settled at that moment. That was why she decided that she would merely wish for the happiness of those two. However, even if Chastille understood that intuitively, she didn't understand it well enough to put into words. That was surely why she was left with such hazy feelings on the matter.

"Hm..." Nephteros continued to stare up at Chastille, and though she did so timidly, she embraced her back, saying, "...I'll let you stay like this... for just a little while."

In response, Chastille spoiled herself on the dark elf's kindness.

Half an hour later, Nephteros had finished her treatment of the Angelic Knights in the barracks. She was in the sickbay, where there were about ten beds lined up for the injured, which were all escorted by the three knights. These were, of course, precautions against the earlier assailant.

"Well, I guess that's everyone."

"Yeah. Are you alright? I think you've used up too much of your strength, personally..."

"...Well, I am tired, but that's all, really."

Upon hearing that answer, a certain thought rose to Chastille's mind.

The fact that she's speaking about her own condition means she's let her guard down a little, right? The two of them showed their embarrassing sides to each other earlier, so it felt like Nephteros' attitude had softened up just a little.

"...I thought... they all died," Nephteros said as she looked at the Angelic Knights atop the beds. There were four survivors among the patrol members, and two who had perished. Chastille was also hopelessly pessimistic about their chances for survival after arriving on the scene, but luckily, the Anointed Armor's defensive powers had strengthened their vitality.

After a while, Chastille cast her gaze over to the sorcerer sleeping in the corner of the room. He was one of Zagan's subordinates, and had been running about during the day without rest in an attempt to heal the wounded.

"Zagan sent over a sorcerer who excelled in healing, so we were able to heal those who couldn't be saved by the church's powers."

Several sorcerers were alternating shifts, and it was set up so one of them was always at the church. At first, the sorcerers were treated

with enmity by those of the church, but after spending some time under the same roof, they were able to build up a sense of affinity with each other. The sorcerer here also put in great effort to heal the Angelic Knights, so they naturally began helping him out. That was why Chastille had the leisure to check in on Nephteros' condition in the first place. There was also the fact that it was late at night, and everyone had gone to sleep by then.

"There was no need for me to butt in, I guess," Nephteros said, shrugging her shoulders.

"No, if not for you, we wouldn't have been able to treat them to this extent. Besides, there were some here that we were told were too far gone."

The sorcerer who was treating them said that while he was able to prolong their lives, they would have to give up after a few days. And yet, now that they were all stable. Everyone at the church owed Nephteros a massive debt of gratitude.

"In any case, it's quite stuffy here," Nephteros said as she looked over to the Angelic Knights behind her.

"We can't be sure that the assailant from earlier won't return, so there's no way we can drop our guards."

"That guy called themselves Azazel, right? That's the first time I've seen the real thing," Nephteros said as she let out a snort with a 'hmpf.'

"Hold on! Do you know something about Azazel!?" Chastille's eyes shot open upon hearing that.

"Huh...? Aren't they the assassination squad of the church? Mast... Bifrons said not to get involved with them."

Assassination squad? It's not the name of a Sacred Sword?

"T-Tell me more. Is Azazel not the name of a Sacred Sword?" Chastille asked as she squatted down in front of Nephteros.

"A Sacred Sword...? I don't know anything about that, but I've heard that an organization within the church goes by that name... You don't know about it despite being a part of the church?"

"I've never heard of it... Also, it's likely that Lord Raphael hasn't heard of it either," Chastille said as she groaned. Zagan claimed that Azazel was the name of the Thirteenth, a Sacred Sword. However, it seemed to also be the name of an organization.

Still, the church went out of their way to use the name Azazel. It can't be unrelated... What exactly did that mean, though?

"...Azazel may actually be the name of a Sacred Sword."

"Is that so? Well, I've never heard of it. Doesn't make any sense, either. I mean, wouldn't the proud church go around bragging if that was true?"

"You don't have to make us sound that bad..." Chastille muttered.

She understood that the church could come off somewhat pompous, but it really did take some nerve to say that right to an Angelic Knight's face. However, thinking of the church's natural disposition may have led toward a strange connection.

"Azazel is the name of the Thirteenth Sacred Sword, but for some reason the church doesn't possess it, or perhaps it's judged as something abominable?" Chastille remarked.

"No, then they wouldn't use it as the name of the dark side, right? If it were the name of an abomination, I don't think they would take its name as their own."

"Maybe they were one and the same at some point... I know the church has a reason to keep knowledge of this group from the public, but even Archangels knowing nothing about it is suspicious. And if they actually do specialize in assassination, and they had a Sacred Sword entrusted to one among their ranks, then there would have been cases where they were sent out to face sorcerers..."

"I see," Nephteros said with a nod. Then, she continued, "That's why sorcerers who aren't a part of the church know about it... you mean? It certainly makes sense, but what of the reason it's judged to be abominable?"

"That's... I don't know. Maybe a sorcerer took it, or the wielder is a traitor, or something..." Chastille said, clearly taken aback. Then, she said, "No, hold on..."

There was a far more important problem than whether Azazel was the name of a Sacred Sword or an organization. And somewhat astonished by the fact that she hadn't realized it sooner, Chastille questioned Nephteros.

"Nephteros. I'd like to hear your opinion."

"About what?"

"Do you think it's a coincidence that an assassin naming themselves Azazel was sent after me while you're being chased by that chimera?"

"Are you saying that was also instigated by Bifrons? Wouldn't that mean that your church is also Bifrons' puppet?" Nephteros inquired as her golden eyes shot wide open.

"That's not necessarily the case. Couldn't that sorcerer have just leaked insidious information and guided the church's actions?"

Chastille was sheltering Nephteros. And as a result, she ended up getting in Bifrons' way. There was a pretty high probability that Bifrons put Azazel into action to flush her back out.

"That assassin said they discovered you were a rebel, right? Would that mean they weren't planning to kill you right away?" Nephteros cast down her gaze in thought for a moment as she muttered those words.

“Then, you were their original target?”

“That seems to make sense. Like you said, it would be difficult for Bifrons’ pawns to invade the church itself, after all...”

“Sorry. Even though I said it would be safe here...” Chastille mumbled as she let out a sigh.

“Don’t worry about it. In any case, I never thought I could get away from Bifrons.”

“Still, let’s get through this together, okay? We both need to make it through this alive.” Chastille said as she held Nephteros’ hand.

“...Hmph. I never planned to just lay down and die.”

And just like that, the long day finally headed toward its conclusion.

Chapter IV: Loving Someone Comes with Many Tiresome Misunderstandings, but They're All Worth It

“Hey, Kuroka, why did you think of working at the church?”

It was late in the evening. Despite finally reaching the church, Kuroka was feeling down due to her repeated failures as Kuu questioned her. Since both of them were abducted together and were around the same age, the two girls felt comfortable talking openly.

They were in a room normally reserved for nuns, which they had been told to share. There was a bunk bed in the room, and since Kuroka couldn't see, Kuu yielded the bottom bunk to her. The bed was stiff, but when Kuroka tried touching the sheet, she could tell that there wasn't a single crease on it, which proved it was quite clean. It also smelled like an ash tree, which made her realize wood from such trees were used for either the bed frame or the floor.

Originally, since Kuroka came over to serve as a priest, she would have been assigned to a much nicer room. However, due to the incident from earlier that resulted in multiple casualties, no one had time to make preparations for her. The priest garments she was supposed to receive also had yet to be delivered, so she was still wearing the clothes that she received from the man who saved her in town.

“I'm not trying to be rude here, but isn't working at the church kinda hard with your condition, Kuroka?” Kuu brought her face closer as she continued with her questions. She was likely worried about Kuroka's eyesight.

“I'd be lying if I said it wasn't hard, but it's a job I love,” Kuroka replied with a smile on her face.

“Huh...? What part do you like?”

“Um, let's see...” Kuroka touched her own face as Kuu looked at her curiously, then continued, “My eyes ended up like this after some sorcerers attacked me, but at that time, I was saved by an Angelic Knight.”

Right when she gave up and awaited death, they showed up and routed the sorcerers. Even after that, when Kuroka was in low spirits

due to the loss of her vision, they would frequently come to visit her and would encourage her all the time. The reason she was able to regain her footing was all thanks to that knight.

"Is this a love story!? I wanna hear more! I wanna hear more!" Kuu let out a rough breath as she screamed for more answers excitedly.

"It's not really a love story. He's far older than me, after all... If anything, he'd be a dad... I guess."

"Oh, you like old guys, huh!?"

"...I don't. Probably," Kuroka said, pondering the thought. She liked the way that man's hand felt as he brushed her head. Also, when she was scared of walking, he would lead her by her hand. Plus, when she finally learned to take care of herself, he gave her a cane as a present. Still, despite all that, it seemed a little naive to call the warmth she received from him love.

"Honestly, I really liked him. That's why I wanted to try being like him..."

"That's definitely love! You should confess!" Kuu exclaimed as she covered her face, seemingly overcome with emotion.

"He's... already dead," Kuroka responded, shaking her head solemnly. She could tell that Kuu had stiffened up right as she said that. The life expectancy of Angelic Knights was short. From sorcerers, to monsters, to wars, they had far too many enemies. Their lives were filled with constant battles. Frankly, that man had lived for far longer than the average for those of his profession.

"S-Sorry, that was insensitive."

"It's alright. I'm sure he fought valiantly right until the end, so it's not something to be sad about..."

"Hey, Kuroka, do you have any other family?"

"Hm... No, I don't."

Her entire family was killed before she joined the church. That was why the only one she considered family was that Angelic Knight.

"Then... you're the same as Kuu. Hey, if that's the case, can I think of you as my big sis?" Kuu asked as she timidly grasped Kuroka's small, yet warm hand.

"Yes. Of course you can," Kuroka said despite being taken aback at first.

"Eheheh. We'll be together forever!"

What a kind girl... Kuroka assumed she was doomed to be alone in that unfamiliar town, so Kuu's kindness was more than welcome.

"Huh...? I wonder what's going on? It's really noisy," Kuroka said as her triangular ears began twitching.

"Huh? Really? Hm... I don't really hear anything..." Kuu replied. Because she lost her eyesight, Kuroka's ears were far more sensitive

than most. That was why she was able to hear Kuu's screams when she was being abducted the other day.

"I'm going to go take a little look. There might be something I can help with," Kuroka said as she picked up her cane and stood up.

"Kuroka, you work too hard."

After returning a smile to Kuu, who was laid down in bed as if suggesting it was better to rest, Kuroka left the room. And as she did, Kuu called out to her.

"Oh yeah, what was your dad's name, Kuroka?"

Since it was the name of someone important to her, Kuroka felt that she wanted her new friend to know. That was why she responded instantly.

"Raphael," she proclaimed, not realizing that her answer was about to turn her whole world upside down.



The next day, Zagan headed out to the town of Kianoides once more. He had left the muffler he got from Nephy back in the castle.

I need to throw out all the trash before our date... However, throwing out the trash would lead to his clothes getting dirty, and he wanted to have his muffler in perfect condition for their date. That was why he set off to quickly finish off Bifrons without it.

I guess I'll capture Bifrons' chimera first, then follow the traces of mana from there... Chimeras and golems were connected to their caster by mana, so it was possible to trace the location of the caster through them. Having said that, if a chimera had infiltrated the town, then there was no way Chastille and the Angelic Knights would be sitting on their hands. It was likely wiser for Zagan to contact them rather than loiter around town.

That being the case, Zagan was currently looking for traces of sorcery in town, which was easier said than done. There were still close to a hundred sorcerers living in this town, and all of them used sorcery in their daily lives. Lately, some had even been dispatched to the church on his orders. Add all that onto the fact that the battle with the chimera had only occurred the previous day, and it was obvious there were traces of sorcery everywhere.

Finding something similar to the wavelength of Bifrons' mana in all that was like looking for a needle in a haystack. However, this was Zagan's town. He had multiple barriers up surrounding it that did things like repairing damaged buildings to protecting the sorcerers under his employ. He even had a barrier to detect 'foreign objects.'

"...Hmm. Over here?" Zagan said as he walked over to the slums, which were far away from the shopping district. There, he found a trace of sorcery that didn't belong to a sorcerer of his faction. Taking a

look around, there was no trace of destruction in sight. There was also no trace of his restoration barrier being put to use. There wasn't even any sign of a conflict. And precisely because that was the case, Zagan was suspicious.

A normal sorcerer wouldn't erase the traces of their sorcery so thoroughly like this... The sorcerer who acted in this area hid the evidence because they didn't want Zagan to find out. Moreover, they clearly utilized a sophisticated technique, since he could find no real evidence of anything happening. Now, the problem was what exactly they had done. Zagan searched the area, hoping to find anything at all, when he suddenly felt a presence behind him.

One of Bifrons' lackeys? Zagan turned around while preparing his sorcery perfectly for dealing with any sort of trap... and found an unexpected face before him.

"You're the one from yesterday... Kuroka, was it?"

It was one of the two girls he saved from being abducted and dropped off at the church.

"This voice... are you the man I met yesterday?"

Why is she here... He knew Bifrons would use that girl to egg him on, so Zagan drew closer to Kuroka, remaining vigilant of his surroundings in an attempt to prevent that. Kuroka looked up at him with her vacant eyes... and then broke into tears in an instant.

"Waaaaaah! Mister! Wh-What do I do!?"

She was crying so desperately that it made him feel like an idiot for being on guard.

"...What happened?"

"Kuu... The girl who was with me yesterday vanished!"

She was talking about the vulpin girl from the other day, and Zagan couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Calm down. Isn't she being sheltered by the church?" Zagan asked as he guided her away from the dangerous slums and sat her down on a chair in a small plaza. After he bopped her head and calmed her down, Kuroka began explaining matters with a stutter.

"I've been... doing nothing but failing at my job, and Sir Torres always gets angry at me..."

Well, she definitely didn't seem like the luckiest girl around, so it wasn't all that difficult to imagine things going poorly for her.

"And so, because I wasn't being useful, they told me to look after Kuu, but that girl... vanished..."

"When? Maybe knowing that will help?"

"I only noticed it in the morning, but it seems she vanished some time before that," Kuroka replied with a shake of her head.

"Did you let the others know? Actually, why are you walking around outside on your own?"

“I haven’t told anyone else yet. There was some incident, and everyone is injured or busy, so I can’t cause them even more concern,” Kuroka explained as she shook her head once more. She then pulled a small piece of cloth from her pocket. It looked like an old rag, but seemed to be a ribbon.

“This is Kuu’s ribbon. When we were caught by the canus, she wrapped it around my wound. My eyesight is poor, but my ears and nose are good, so I thought maybe I could track Kuu by her scent...”

They weren’t at the level of canus or lycans, but tabaxi were said to have a much better sense of smell than humans. In Kuroka’s case, her sense of smell was likely amplified due to her loss of vision.

“You saved her and brought her to safety, so why did this happen...? I don’t think Kuu would just run away on her own.”

That made perfect sense, since she had no home to go to. Zagan had a bad feeling about it.

“You said there was an incident, right? Did something else happen after you arrived at the church?”

Kuroka shook her head vigorously, indicating she had no clue.

Well, I guess she doesn’t know... Since she was blind, they were likely treating her like a nuisance. Even if something went wrong, they probably chose to waste no time telling her about it.

“Kuroka, did Kuu’s scent lead you to that place we were just at?”

“...Y-Yes.”

Zagan couldn’t tell anything by scent, but if Kuu had gone there, then there was a high possibility that she got involved with a dangerous sorcerer.

But why did that brat sneak out of the church? It was possible that Zagan could find out if he knew what happened at the church, but there was no way for him to access that knowledge at present.

“Kuroka, did anyone strange come to the church or anything?”

“I only started working at the church yesterday... I’m not sure what would and wouldn’t be strange.”

“Anything is fine. Maybe someone who seemed like a sorcerer or someone who had a strange scent, as you would put it.”

There was a high probability that someone like that abducted Kuu.

I don’t know how valuable a vulpin brat is, though... Kuroka, on the other hand, was of a rare breed, so she was rather valuable to sorcerers. And after thinking deeply about it for a moment, Kuroka let out an ‘Ah.’

“It wasn’t really someone strange, but more like a goddess, I guess?”

“A goddess?”

“Yes. You know how a corpse has a certain scent to it? I thought

someone was already long gone by their smell, but that goddess managed to heal the person who smelled like a corpse and save them!" Kuroka replied with a nod as if it were perfectly obvious.

Zagan cocked his head to the side. It was true that he had dispatched several sorcerers to the church to cooperate with them, but they likely weren't able to heal someone on the verge of death like that. That being the case...

Oh, now that I think of it, Nephteros is there... It didn't seem like she was the one who took Kuu, so that information was useless, but it was nice to know the people at the church had accepted her.

"It'd be nice if I could be like her someday," Kuroka said, completely entranced by the thought.

"Then just do it. What's stopping you?" Zagan replied in a matter-of-factly tone, which made Kuroka stare back at him in wonder with her vacant eyes before forming a bitter smile.

"You really are kind, Mister. Normally, you would say that's impossible, you know? I mean... I can't do anything unless I get help from others..." Kuroka muttered, conveying her clearly sad state of mind.

"Even the person that you think is a goddess probably failed many times over, experienced pain, wished for salvation, and was saved by others," Zagan replied resolutely as he shook his head.

"Mister... do you maybe know who the goddess is?" Kuroka asked as she tilted her head to the side blankly.

"...Who knows? Listen, there is no goddess in the church. Just think about it, someone who relied on only themselves would have no reason to be at the church, right?"

Someone who relied on only themselves was far more likely to trample over others and soak their hands in sorcery. That was why they were unrelated to the church.

"Then, you mean because the goddess was saved by others, she wants to save others?" Kuroka asked as she seemed to catch what Zagan was saying.

"Perhaps."

"...But I don't have any power like that. I can't rescue others like the goddess did, so how can I ever repay those who saved me?"

"Hey, when I asked you the same thing yesterday, what did you tell me?" Zagan spoke to her in a truly astonished tone, looking about ready to burst into laughter.

"Huh? The same question...? Oh, then that person was also your benefactor, Mister?"

Zagan didn't reply, and simply shrugged his shoulders as Kuroka stood up.

"Thank you very much, Mister. I'm going to continue looking for

Kuu.”

“...Well, I'll take a look around as well. Not sure I'll find her, though...”

“Okay! Thank you very much!” Kuroka exclaimed as she bowed down with a bob. Then, she turned around and left.

“Hey, wait! If you run, you'll...”

After just a few steps, she fell right over.

Why does she not check her footing properly when she has a cane...

Zagan was astonished by that, but he realized it could have been because she wasn't yet used to using the cane in that way. No, maybe it was better to say that it was because she was used to not needing it that she was careless. In that case, it would mean that she lost her vision relatively recently. And seeing that unreliable figure off from behind, Zagan also stood up.

I guess I'll go take another look at that spot... It was possible that there was a clue to Kuu's whereabouts there.

“Hey there! Long time no see, Archdemon Zagan,” a familiar voice called out to him from behind as he began walking. It was a voice that he could never forget, since it was that of a repulsive Archdemon he despised.



“Nephteros, are you alright?”

Nephteros woke up as Chastille shook her body. She was sweating all over, and her clothes and hair were sticking to her body. Her breathing was out of order, and she knew that she had been stuck in a nightmare.

Just like the previous night, she was resting in the nap room adjacent to an office in the church. During the fight against the assailant, Barbatos' Flames of Indignation had burned not only the office, but even the nap room to ashes, but both had been restored to normal. That was likely the power of Zagan's barrier. Back when Nephteros fired celestial mysticism in the middle of town, it ended up restoring the damage to the buildings in an instant. The sight made her realize the newest Archdemon didn't only possess combat powers like 'Heaven's Phosphor' and 'devouring sorcery.'

“Are you alright? You seemed to be having quite the nightmare,” Chastille inquired as she anxiously put her hand to Nephteros' forehead.

“I'm fine... is what I'd like to say, but I feel horrible,” Nephteros replied. She had a headache like she had been crying for hours, and her body felt heavy. Even though her recovery should have worked faster thanks to the mana in the church, she felt excessively fatigued. Still, luckily, it wasn't to the extent where she couldn't get up.

“Have some water for now.”

“...Thank you,” Nephteros said as she obediently accepted the cup from Chastille, and after hydrating herself, her thoughts grew clearer.

“I feel like... I saw a bad dream.”

“Do you not remember it?”

I don't remember, but it really was a terrible dream... Nephteros thought as she nodded. She didn't remember what was going on or what she saw, but she felt like she'd been filled with hate in that dream. Her hate was so grand that it couldn't even be compared to the hate she held for Nephelia before. It was deep like a bottomless bog, and she was unable to struggle against that emotion.

And yet, I also felt sad... She didn't know why she felt a deep sense of despair in that dream, but those feelings were etched into her heart like scars. After wiping away her sweat, she noticed that Chastille was still looking at her anxiously.

“It's a dream I've been seeing often lately. Though, I hadn't seen it for a while until now...”

After talking about it, she remembered that she hadn't really even slept over the past seven days or so.

“When exactly do you mean by recently?” Chastille asked, knitting her brows.

“...About the time... I was swallowed by that ‘sludge,’” Nephteros replied hesitantly.

“C-Could that be an after-effect of being eaten by it!?” Chastille exclaimed as she rose to her feet with a bang.

“I think... it's a little different. I mean, there's no effect on my body, but...” Nephteros' words drifted off for a bit as she found it hard explain the disgusting sight before saying, “I think what I saw in my dreams... was the Demon Lord.”

“What do you mean? Something like the Demon Lord's memories?” Chastille asked as her eyes shot open.

“I don't know. Like I said, I don't even remember what happened in the dream.”

“Is it painful?” Chastille looked at her anxiously, finding it hard to ask her a proper question.

“It isn't pleasant, but...” Nephteros paused, putting her thoughts together before continuing with, “The ‘sludge’ was trapped in the depths of despair within my dream. It hated anything and everything, it was in pain, and it was so sad that it couldn't even breathe.”

“Hold on. Does that mean the Demon Lord feels the same emotions as us?”

“I only felt it in my dream... but I think so...”

The demon they saw in the hidden elven village was far too mindless to be considered sentient. And even if it did possess a mind

of its own, it was difficult to believe that it held the same emotions as humans. Yet, Nephteros believed that the feelings of despair in her dreams were the emotions of the Demon Lord.

“Does Bifrons also know about this?” Chastille questioned Nephteros after a brief pause.

“No. I thought Bifrons would make fun of me, so I never talked about it with anyone else,” Nephteros said as she shook her head.

“Then why me?” Chastille asked, seemingly shocked.

“Now that you mention it, that’s true... Why did I trust you?” Nephteros stared back at Chastille in wonder as she mulled over that dilemma. And as Nephteros was worried about how she couldn’t explain her actions, Chastille gazed at her with a gentle smile, which left her even more confused.

“Huh...? What?”

“No, I just thought that maybe you’ve started to trust me.”

“Trust...?” Nephteros got worked up and was about to deny it, but before she could, Chastille stood up. She was already wearing her Anointed Armor, and Nephteros could tell that she was heading out to battle.

“Sorry, but it’s about time that I need to head out on my mission. If the person from yesterday is targeting me, then they shouldn’t show up here again. Please get some rest.”

“...Wait,” Nephteros said as she moved her legs out of bed. She was unable to shake off her fatigue, but it didn’t stop her from moving. She was far better off than she was the last few days when she was running about without even having any water.

“I’ll go with you. You’re planning to take care of the chimera, right? That thing is after me, so things will go more smoothly if I’m with you.”

“You’ll help us?”

I’ve finally learned how horrible it is to watch others die because of me... Nephteros thought as she averted her gaze. Chastille was no slouch, but she likely had no way to defeat an immortal monster on her own. That was why Nephteros wanted to assist her. However, there was no way that she could honestly put those feelings into words, so she simply pouted and turned her face away.

“I’d also like to be rid of that thing forever, and I just figured it’d be more efficient for two people to face it rather than one.”

“I see... Well, thanks. That chimera may be too much for me to handle alone. Please lend me your help, Nephteros,” Chastille said as she looked back at her with a strained smile.

“I-If you insist!”

And just as the two of them were about to head out... Nephteros felt a shiver run down her spine, and looked out the window.

“What’s wrong, Nephteros?”

“It seems... it’s coming from over there.”

After hurriedly opening the window, they spotted a hooded figure in the plaza outside the building. It had the shape of a person, but Nephteros was convinced it was the chimera that had been chasing her for ages.

There’s no mistaking this discomforting feeling... The robe had lost its meaning as a cloak because of the continuous battles with Nephteros and the Angelic Knights, but the hood itself still stubbornly concealed its face. She didn’t know who it tore them from, but it was wearing filthy clothes. And upon taking in that sight, Nephteros suddenly remembered something.

It’s probably just a coincidence, but that thing’s physique is the same as that Azazel from yesterday... She wasn’t positive of that fact because the assailant from the other day was wearing clothing that obscured them, but she had a hunch that they were the same. And perhaps because it was waiting for them to come out, the shadowy figure in the hood simply stood there looking at up them, showing no signs of launching an attack.

“You’re kidding...” Chastille became visibly pale as she said that.

“Why are you trembling? Listen, Bifrons would think nothing of causing chaos in the middle of town. Let’s get rid of it befo—”

“That’s not the problem!” Chastille screamed in a voice that was clearly on the verge of tears. And then, she pointed at the shadowy figure with a trembling finger and said, “Those are the clothes... of a girl we took into our care yesterday.”

She was a girl who was abducted by slavers and escaped to the safety of the church. They were the clothes that she was wearing back then... and they were now covered in blood as they draped over the monster before them.



“Hey there! Long time no see, Archdemon Zagan.”

After turning around to face the source of the voice, Zagan’s body stiffened up. The one standing there wasn’t the figure of that repulsive Archdemon. It was a vulpin girl with triangular ears and a fluffy tail. Her clothes looked to be supplied to her by the church. She was wearing a black one-piece dress that looked similar to what a nun would wear. It was the girl Kuroka was running about looking for, Kuu. Zagan was filled with disgust and caution as he practically spat out words at the girl.

“What are you planning to do in that repulsive form, Bifrons?”

The vulpin girl merely blinked back at him blankly, seemingly confused.

“What’s wrong, Mister? What’s a by-fronz?”

“Cut the crap,” Zagan roared as he clenched his fist, then swung it down at the girl without hesitation.

“Aahahahaa! Why’re you so mad, Mister?”

After leaping into the air nimbly and dodging Zagan’s fist, the vulpin girl grabbed onto a tree branch overhead and laughed while hanging there. She then twirled around the branch with a somersault and landed atop it. And what came out of the girl’s mouth next... was an irritating voice that could not be discerned as that of either a boy or a girl.

“Come on, there’s no reason to get all upset! This is just a prank, a small joke, even. It’s a form I don’t usually take on, so I’ve gotta enjoy it a bit here.”



“You’re the only bastard having fun here...” Zagan replied as he clenched his fist, intending to pulverize the entire tree. However, the girl stuck out both her hands in an attempt to stop him.

“Hey, hold on. I just came to talk. Isn’t it fine to keep me company for a bit?”

“Why would I want to talk to somebody who’s about to die?” Zagan proclaimed as he cocked his head to the side. His answer simply made the girl’s mouth warp into a hideous smile.

“Hang on, you should stop right there. This body’s the real deal. I’ll have you know it belongs to that pitiful girl that you so kindly saved. It’d be no skin off my nose if you killed her, you know?”

In short, she’s a hostage... It may have been good fortune that Kuroka left earlier. In any case, Zagan never thought he would hate the idea of having a simple conversation that much. Though, perhaps that just came naturally when dealing with Archdemons.

“I thought you’d be a little shaken, but maybe you’ve got a thing for the stink of beasts too? Go on, take a look! This body is quite developed, so wouldn’t it be a waste to kill her? I mean, I even had to go to the trouble of finding people who’d pounce on her in a heartbeat. Ahahaha!”

The girl twisted about while touching her own waist and breasts, at which point a tear streaked down from her eye.

This scumbag... Seems Kuu’s consciousness is still intact... The innocent smile she showed him when he split his apple with her and the way she nervously said that Zagan wasn’t someone scary weren’t a part of Bifrons’ act. And as he came to that realization, Zagan also figured out that fact that he came into contact with her in the first place was a trap to chip away at his desire to fight. It was likely that everything from her being abducted to her running into Zagan as she tried to escape was all an elaborate ruse. As Zagan quietly lowered his fist, the girl finally put her hand to her chest in relief.

“Looks like you’re finally willing to listen to me. Actually, there’s something I’d like to ask of you.”

“Don’t touch me.”

The girl tried to wrap her arm around Zagan in an over-familiar manner, and Zagan cruelly brushed her off.

“Ahahah, come now, don’t you feel sorry for this girl? Even though she’s trembling here with no idea what’s happening to her own body, you’re acting all cold.”

“...Get to the point already,” Zagan snapped back. Honestly, he did find Kuu pitiful, but he could not afford to lower his guard when Bifrons was still controlling her. There was no way he would show her the slightest opening.

“Well, whatever. You’ve likely already noticed, but my little pet ran away from home and stumbled into this town. I want to take her back, so could you let me act as I want here for a bit?”

“How shameless. You dare to ask me for a favor after unleashing that dangerous chimera in my domain?”

“No, listen, that’s a misunderstanding. My chimera hasn’t taken even a single step into town, and it didn’t lay a hand on those stupid Angelic Knights until they drew their swords, you know? I’m hoping you can see that this was all unintentional. I swear, I’m acting in good faith right now.”

“Good faith? What a load of crap. You plan on dragging Nephteros back no matter what I say here. Be honest, you’re only revealing yourself now because your preparations are complete. You went out of your way to hijack that brat’s body as part of your plan, right?” Zagan replied in a critical tone.

Bifrons wasn’t asking for permission. This was a declaration of war. A statement that Archdemon Bifrons was invading Archdemon Zagan’s domain. It was only natural that all their pieces were already in place. The girl then smiled as if that response was exactly what she wanted to hear.

“It’s nice that you’re quick on the uptake. Though honestly, that ruins some of the fun of it...”

The girl slowly raised her hand. It was like she was signaling the outbreak of a war. And then, just as she opened her mouth...

“Hm... Are you Bifrons? I can’t really condone you acting up in somebody else’s domain.”

The one who slapped the girl’s shoulder was an old woman wearing a robe. And under it was a face that neither Bifrons nor Zagan expected to see at all.

“Why are you here... Archdemon Orias?”

For some reason or other, a third Archdemon showed up in Kianoides. Even Zagan was taken aback by her appearance.

“I’d also like to hear you answer that, Orias. Why are you here?” Zagan questioned her in a sharp voice.

“My goodness. Aren’t you the one who called me here?” Orias replied with a simple shrug of her shoulders.

“...Oh,” Zagan dryly uttered that single word, feeling dumb. After all, he was the one who demanded that this old woman visit her daughter in the first place.

I told her to do something time consuming, but she’s already here?

Contrary to expectations, she was extremely motivated to get her task over with as soon as possible, which turned out in his favor, leaving Zagan quite bemused.

“Ahaha... When did you two get so close, I wonder?”

“We’re not really all that close, but when I tried casually messing with him the other day, he turned the tables on me. So, as an apology, I came to offer him a tribute,” Orias stated, a smile peeking out from beneath her hood. After saying that, she pulled out a bottle from her robe, which made Zagan stare at her in wonder.

“No way! You really found some?”

“I just happened to pass by it at a market due to good fortune. And well, since I got my hands on it, I thought it best to drop by right away.”

“You have my thanks. Shall we go have a drink at my castle, then? I can at least have a meal prepared for you in return.”

“That’s quite the attractive offer, but what to do? It looks like you’re in the middle of something here...”

Zagan looked at the vulpin girl as he heard that, finally remembering she was there. The girl had both her hands in the air as if she was surrendering, and tilted her head to the side in confusion.

“Um, can I ask something? What exactly did you want so badly that Granny Orias had to go out and get it personally?”

“Liquor. It’s a type you can’t get anymore, so I had almost given up hope of ever getting my hands on some. Luckily, I asked Archdemon Orias to assist me in my search.”

“Feels quite good to see you so delighted over it,” Orias replied with a not all that dissatisfied smile on her face. On the other hand, the young girl was left completely taken aback.

“Huh, liquor...? By liquor, you mean an alcoholic beverage, right? I’m not really sure how valuable it is, but... why? Is that really something an Archdemon should spend their precious time seeking?”

“Hm... From the beginning, I was never one to keep disciples or familiars by my side, which left me with no choice but to do my shopping myself.”

“Um... Shopping... An Archdemon... shopping...”

The girl slumped her shoulders as if her common sense was being smashed to pieces. Nevertheless, she bravely opened her mouth to speak.

“Th-Then, what kind of liquor is it? You’re not going to tell me it’s some sort of spirit liquor that will grant immortality, right?”

“It’s something whose manufacturing method has been lost because you destroyed that elven village,” Zagan replied with an angry glare as he clapped the girl’s shoulder with a thud. Sure, Zagan’s outburst of anger was the thing that reduced the village to ashes, but he decided to leave that part out. In response, the girl then drooped her shoulders once more as if she was fed up with absolutely everything.

“Should’ve known... When three Archdemons gather, they all act

as they please. Still, I'm the type who's true to their word. I won't step aside just because Granny Orias is here, got it?"

"What a coincidence. I'm also the exact same kind of person. And so, I'll have you go to hell now," Zagan proclaimed. And in the next instant, the vulpin girl fell to her knees as if losing all her strength.

"H-Huh? I can move...?" Kuu's real voice finally poured out of her mouth. However, her relieved expression was dyed in despair the very next instant, as a black 'sludge' poured out of her mouth.

"Gak...!? Huh, wh-what the...?"

However, the sludge didn't just pour out of her mouth, but also her eye sockets, her ears, her nose... It seemingly poured out of every orifice in her body.

That damn Bifrons went and planted that Sludge Demon Lord in Kuu... There was no way he could forget. It was a disgusting creature that possessed Nephteros and devoured several dozen sorcerers. Zagan and Nephys had defeated it already, but the Sludge Demon Lord was enormous. Some remnant surviving wasn't all too strange.

This sludge possessed beings, then ate them from the inside, accelerating its own growth and fueling its inexhaustible regeneration. With such an abundance of prey in Kianoides, it likely wouldn't take more than a minute for it to grow large enough to engulf the entire town.

"Get away from her, Orias. Even an Archdemon can't touch that thing directly," Zagan said as he immediately distanced himself from the girl.

"...Seems so," Orias replied as she backed away.

"S-Saaave... meee... AAAAAAAAAAAAAAH—" Kuu let out a sorrowful scream, and Bifrons' laugh rang out shortly after.

"Aahahahah, now then, what'll you do? I bet you can tell just from looking, but this is a fragment of the Sludge Demon Lord you defeated before. Now, can a softhearted person like you kill this girl to save the town? Or will you sacrifice the town to save this girl? Ahahahah!"

"...How idiotic," Zagan said, interrupting Bifrons' grand speech. He then stabbed his hand into the girl's chest without hesitation.

"Huh...?" Kuu blinked back at him as if she couldn't believe it. And in his hand, which pierced out her back, was a black pulsing lump.

"Burn to ash — Heaven's Phosphor."

With that, the lump in his hand was reduced to dust. And, as if killed by that attack, the girl whose chest was still pierced by his arm collapsed into Zagan's arms.

"I'm surprised. I didn't think you would kill her that quickly... Maybe I've misjudged you."

“Wait, did you not see how I killed this thing last time?” Zagan didn’t know where that voice was coming from anymore, but he replied in an exasperated tone regardless.

“...What?”

Seriously? How does this idiot think Nephteros survived, then? The Sludge Demon Lord could even pull in the Sigil of the Archdemon and devour all sorcery. Bifrons set up a barrier back then to keep anyone from escaping, so it was possible that the barrier prevented Bifrons from being able to observe what was going on. Though, that seemed truly foolish.

After Zagan pulled his arm out, there wasn’t a single wound left on the girl’s body. She was even breathing quietly.

“Ridiculous...”

“You’re the one being ridiculous. It’s not all that difficult to use sorcery for both killing and healing at the same time, right?”

Zagan used Heaven’s Phosphor to burn away just the sludge at the exact same time he applied healing sorcery to Kuu’s body. This was the exact same method Zagan used to defeat the Sludge Demon Lord and save Nephteros.

“...” Bifrons’ voice vanished, leaving this sense of being at a loss for words in the air. It seemed there were no other tricks planted in Kuu’s body... Well, a fragment of the Sludge Demon Lord was a big enough trick that it could easily destroy the entire town. It could be said that sorcery capable of combating such a thing was quite rare. At the very least, it would be completely impossible without power on the level of an Archdemon.

After letting out a snort, Zagan finally raised Kuu up into his arms.

“Orias. Could you erase this girl’s memories? That’s your specialty, right?”

“I don’t mind, but why?”

“Do you not think there are things in this world that one is better off not remembering?”

“I’ll look after this girl until she wakes up. I can’t promise that I’ll carry out your request, though,” Orias replied as she looked back at him with a bitter smile. Then, she took Kuu from him. Even if it was something she became by chance, she was still an Archdemon. There was no way she would obey his every command. Still, he felt Kuu was likely safe with her.

If Bifrons’ objective is Nephteros, it’s pretty obvious where the real stage is... Bifrons’ preparations were sure to be far fiercer over there. And just as Zagan was about to run off, Orias called out to him, seemingly just remembering something.

“Oh right, I’m not saying it’s compensation for looking after this girl or anything, but I have a request.”

I see. I didn't think she came by just to bring me liquor... Zagan halted as he came to an understanding. It seemed that this was the real reason that Orias came to Kianoides. And so, Zagan sat down on a bench to hear her out.

"Do you think I would ever refuse a request from you?"

Orias was still Nephy's only remaining blood relative. Even if Nephy rejected this old woman, Zagan would pay her respect.

"I'm thankful for that, but are you sure this is fine? From the way that brat Bifrons was talking, I don't think you have much time to have a leisurely chat," Orias said in a surprised tone. According to Barbatos, a chimera was chasing Nephteros. Kuu wasn't a chimera, so it was clear that there was something else set in motion. Nevertheless, Zagan shrugged his shoulders like he wasn't the least bit worried.

"It's not a problem. My subordinates aren't so incompetent that they need me to watch over each and every little thing they do."

Zagan gave them power as their king. This was a fight between one who was a king of the people, and one who was trying to become a monster. Two Archdemons, kings among sorcerers, with opposing philosophies.

However, what Zagan didn't realize at that moment was why Kuu's clothes had changed. He had absolutely no idea what the clothes she was wearing previously were being used for.



"Keep it together, Chastille!" Nephteros reprimanded Chastille, which made her return to her senses. Even now, the chimera wearing Kuu's clothes was looking up at them from the plaza underneath the nap room.

"She was a therianthrope girl called Kuu. It couldn't be..." Chastille covered her mouth as if filled with the urge to vomit as she said that.

"...We aren't sure that's what happened yet, so just concentrate on finishing that thing off first. Be warned, you won't have the luxury of me protecting you in this fight," Nephteros harshly stated. Though, she did seem to be encouraging Chastille at the same time.

"You're right. If the person I swore to protect ends up being the one who protects me, I wouldn't even be able to show my face to that girl," Chastille said as she mustered her willpower, held out her hand to Nephteros, and continued with, "Let's go, Nephteros. We'll take care of that thing together!"

"...Didn't I already say that was the plan?" Nephteros said, averting her from Chastille. Thought, she did still take her hand. The two of them then leaped from the window down into the plaza. Perhaps because of Nephteros' sorcery, their descent was slow and

they didn't feel any impact upon hitting the ground despite falling from two stories up. And following after them, Angelic Knights came rushing out of the sanctum.

"Knights, focus on minimizing any damage to the surrounding area! We'll take this thing on!" Chastille barked out marching orders to her subordinates. She had made it known to them beforehand that the chimera could not be damaged by any normal weapons, so they knew they had no chance. The loyal Angelic Knights dispersed into the surroundings to protect the town. And, as Chastille drew the Sacred Sword from her back, Nephteros raised her voice.

"Bifrons, you're watching, right? How long do you plan on playing around?"

"Fufufu, despite looking like a little chick on her deathbed yesterday, you sure do look energetic after only a night's rest. It makes me happy to see my cute puppet in such good health," Bifrons' voice rang out from the chimera with a chuckle. It was the voice of the repulsive Archdemon that Chastille had heard before atop that boat. The chimera then stretched out its arm, which looked like a lump of meat.

"Now's a good chance, so let me say this once more. You've had more than enough fun running away from home. It's about time you come back. It's no big deal, since I had some fun too, so I won't hold this against you," Bifrons let out a jarring laugh alongside those words.

"I'm not your damn puppet. I'll resist you to the very end," Nephteros replied with resolve, gritting her teeth, as the chimera's body trembled like its sadistic heart had been spurred on.

"Mmmm. That's what makes you my Nephteros. Still, there's no need to resist, is there? All I want to do is bring you home. It's not like I'm planning to hurt you all, okay?"

"You have some nerve to say that..." Chastille responded, feeling greatly angered by that statement. That made sense, since Nephteros was right on the verge of death from exhaustion when she found her yesterday.

After putting her through something so cruel, where does this Archdemon get off saying they're not planning to hurt her!?

"Is the reason Nephteros is looking so healthy because of you, I wonder?" Bifrons asked as the chimera shifted its hooded face toward her direction.

"What if I am!?"

"Kufufu, thanks for saving her. It's a little unexpected that she's gotten so attached, though..." Bifrons' remarked in a voice that was clearly laden with a sense of discomfort. Still, despite all that, Bifrons continued on in sing-song that showed they were having fun, saying,

“Now, I wonder what kind of face Nephteros would make if she lost you here?”

A terrifying presence filled the air as those words rang out from the chimera.

“It’s coming!” Nephteros roared, which made Chastille dive to the side. Immediately following that, the chimera’s arm stretched out and mowed down the area where Chastille had just been standing.

“Shine — Sacred Sword Azrael!”

This chimera was far too dangerous. After Chastille severed the extended arm, the portion of its body that was burned by the Sacred Sword’s light crumbled to dust. However, using that opening, its body transformed from a humanoid shape to that of a beast and thrust out a multitude of limbs.

“Pierce through — Selini Chavliodous!” Nephteros let out a chant in Celestian at that exact moment. Rainbow colored crystals pierced out from underneath the ground and tore apart the earth. The crystals were as large as the cathedral’s pillar and pierced through the chimera’s torso unerringly.

Alright! Now to crush its mobility before it can move those limbs... The chimera, which possessed numerous limbs, could move in a way that even Chastille was unable to keep up with. It was a big deal to seal that aspect of it. And, just as Chastille leaped in to bring it down with a swift strike, Nephteros yelled out some words of warning.

“You can’t approach it carelessly! That thing’s aiming for you!”

Chastille came to a sudden stop when she heard that, and a moment later, the chimera’s body swelled up, then burst. If Nephteros didn’t stop her, Chastille would have leaped right into that attack, which was flinging out something both of them had seen before.

No way... This is... Chastille and Nephteros both turned pale at the sight of the pitch black sludge.

“Everyone, take cover! No matter what happens, do not touch that sludge!” Chastille exclaimed. There was no way she could forget it. That was the sludge made of the residual thoughts of the Demon Lord. The only things that could deal with it were Zagan’s Heaven’s Phosphor and a high elf’s celestial mysticism. A Sacred Sword could hold it back, but it didn’t possess enough power to annihilate it completely.

Unfortunately, Nephteros’ body was unable to withstand celestial mysticism powerful enough to defeat the thing. In other words, they currently possessed no means of eradicating it.

This is the reason Bifrons is attacking the church without a care in the world...

Nephteros’ face had also stiffened up with tension, but her expression showed no signs of giving up.

“This is not the Demon Lord from back then. Even if I can’t finish it off on my own, it’s something we can deal with together,” Nephteros remarked, her voice conveying her utter belief in her words. The way she spoke with dignity reminded Chastille of Nephy, but made her seem like her own person at the exact same time. That was why Chastille returned a nod.

“How reliable. Let’s fight together, Nephteros,” Chastille replied, deciding to deal with the sludge that had flown around the plaza rather than the chimera’s body itself.

First, I’ll start by eliminating this troublesome sludge... The sludge dissipated, almost looking like it was drying up, as it was mowed down by the Sacred Sword’s light. Seeing this, Chastille could tell that this sludge’s power was far weaker than the Sludge Demon Lord from before. The Sacred Sword’s power was more than enough to deal with it.

Lord Raphael’s Metatron would be far more effective, though... That Sacred Sword’s power manifested as flames. If Raphael got serious, he could use it to cover the entire plaza... However, the only one here was Chastille.

Chastille cast her gaze over to the chimera while she was busy burning away the sludge, saw that it was still unable to break away from the crystal piercing through it, and posed a question to her newfound ally.

“Nephteros, do you have a way of defeating that thing?”

“...I don’t, but I can make it smaller. You take care of it when I do, okay?”

“Roger!” Chastille replied. And then, after taking care of the sludge, she moved to cover Nephteros’ back. At that point, Nephteros put her hand to her chest and began singing.

“[Thou art he who rules over terror. Accompanied by the god of war, become he who brings about destruction and chaos.]”

The atmosphere shook, and the chimera’s body collapsed as if it was being pressed against the ground. It was something Chastille would be informed of later, but this was celestial mysticism that manipulated gravity. There was sorcery that was capable of manipulating the atmosphere, but this was the first time Chastille saw power that could manipulate the force of gravity itself.

Its body was still pierced by crystals. And so, as its wounds were gouged open, the chimera let out a shriek. Following that, its limbs stretched out as if it was trying to stop the pain.

“I won’t let you!” Chastille yelled as she severed each and every one of those limbs. And, as Nephteros continued chanting, the pressure that assaulted the chimera grew stronger.

We can do this! This was clearly an enemy who could be defeated

by combining the powers of a Sacred Sword and celestial mysticism. Chastille grew sure of that fact, but a certain doubt came to mind.

This is weird. Can an enemy sent out by an Archdemon really be defeated so easily? At that exact moment, a voice rang out as if answering that doubt.

“Wh-What is this? What’s going on here?”

A cait sith girl holding a cane was standing still in the plaza, having somehow slipped through the encirclement of Angelic Knights. Seeing the cane in her hand and the lack of light in her eyes, Chastille could tell that this girl was blind.

Has she not noticed the chimera!?

“Fall back, Pastor Kuroka! This is a battlefield!” one of the Angelic Knights surrounding the plaza shouted out. Hearing that, Chastille realized that this girl was the newly appointed priest. Unfortunately, the Angelic Knight’s warning was in vain, and the chimera stretched out its arm toward the young girl.

I won’t make it... The girl was too far away for Chastille to reach. And so, the repulsive chimera’s arm reached in to reduce the poor girl into minced meat. However, just as that image came to mind... a sharp ringing sound resounded in the area. Then, the arm that had attempted to assault the girl crumbled to bits. A moment later, a wooden rod fell to the ground with a clank.

Chastille could tell that it was the cane the girl was holding, but it was far too short. At most, it was only about half the size of the cane. And after looking at what was now in the girl’s hand, her eyes shot open.

It was a thin short sword. It seemed that it was hidden within her cane. It reminded her of the anecdotes of a weapon called a sword cane that they had in the island country to the east, and it also seemed all too familiar. Of course there was no way Chastille would mistake it for something else. Last night, that short sword had cornered Chastille and dismembered Barbatos. It belonged to Azazel.

Why does that girl... have Azazel’s short sword...? The blind cait sith turned toward the chimera, then brandished her short sword in an underhanded grip as she charged in.

“Stop! If you touch that thing, you’ll die!” Chastille exclaimed. However, the girl didn’t stop. And even though it was being pressured by Nephteros’ celestial mysticism, the chimera shot several of its limbs toward her. The moment it looked like the girl was about to be crushed by the limbs coming in overhead, they went astray and struck the ground next to her instead.

“...Huh?”

Someone let out a dumbfounded voice. Even the arm that came sweeping in from the side only brushed by her bangs as if it misjudged

the distance. And then, the third attack that should have struck her head on only hit the air at the edge of her clothing.

“Why... can’t the chimera attack her?” one of the Angelic Knights muttered. However, Chastille alone came to an understanding.

She’s dodging it... It looked like she was just charging straight in head first, but the girl’s posture was extremely low to the ground, and she was shifting her pace by switching between accelerating and decelerating to throw off her opponent. Because her movements looked so natural, it simply appeared as if the attacks against her had gone astray on their own.

Her movements were practically prescient, but Chastille could tell that she was moving by reading the flow of sounds and the wind from her opponent’s movement.

The cait sith girl’s reflexes didn’t simply surpass that of a normal human’s. It was likely a technique that was only possible because she had lost her eyesight and honed all her other senses.

That’s why my sword couldn’t even scratch her... Even if the room they fought in put her at a disadvantage, Chastille’s sword didn’t find its mark once in their fight the previous night. Sure, she had used the Sacred Sword’s light as a flashbang, but there was no way that would work on an already blind target.

After closing in on the chimera in the blink of an eye, the girl drew her second sword and struck at its limbs at their root.

“It’s no good. That’s too shallow!”

Perhaps in exchange for her agility, the strength of her attacks was weak. The short sword was unable to cut into the chimera’s thick skin. That made sense, since she wasn’t even wearing Anointed Armor. However, Chastille realized something in that moment.

This girl cut down the chimera’s attack mere moments ago... And as if answering her thoughts, the girl swung down her second shortsword.

“Take this!”

Her sword came down, accompanied by a battle cry, and severed the chimera’s thick arms right at their root. Nephteros’ celestial mysticism was still at work, so having one of its main supports severed made the chimera collapse on the spot. The girl then mounted the chimera as if to decapitate it.

“It’s not... here either. Just... where is it?”

The voice of the girl who was cutting down the chimera was still uneasy to the point where it felt like she would break down in tears at any moment. However, despite all that, she struck at the chimera all the same.

“Are you... an ally?” Chastille muttered. Upon hearing that, the girl turned toward her with her vacant eyes. And what she felt from that... was bloodlust that stifled her breath, leading her to

spontaneously tremble.

That's completely different from what I've felt when fighting sorcerers or monsters in the past... Was this girl an enemy or an ally? It was too hard for Chastille to tell. Nephteros also instinctively stopped chanting and looked over to the girl. And then, a repulsive voice rang out once more.

"Hey there, aren't you a little late? Special Enforcement Squad Azazel — Kuroka Adelhide."

Like I thought, this girl is Azazel... Chastille gulped audibly. She would never have thought that the ominous figure from yesterday was a girl who was younger than her. She then realized the reason that Bifrons casually began chatting with her even after unleashing that chimera on the church. The chimera was just there to buy time until this girl arrived.

"...Who are you?" Kuroka coldly replied to the voice that came from the chimera beneath her.

"You already know, don't you? It doesn't really matter who I am. All you need to know is that I know what you desire most. It's not this child that you're trying to kill right now, correct?"

Kuroka pointed a sharp gaze toward the chimera. It wasn't even being pointed at them, but Chastille and the other Angelic Knights in the area all felt a cold sweat go down their spines.

"Then tell me, why is that girl's smell coming from you?" Kuroka asked, clearly focused on Kuu's clothes, which had been reduced to mere scraps.

Could it be that she was looking for Kuu? Now that she thought of it, Chastille had received a report that the vulpin girl was brought in by the newly appointed priest. It may have been that she was out looking for her. That was why she attacked the chimera before going after Chastille.

"Oh, are you talking about the girl who was wearing these clothes? You don't have to worry about that. She's already being sheltered by that 'Mister' you know so well."

"I-Is that true?"

"Trust me. If she's under that 'Mister's' patronage, no one can touch her."

"...Thank goodness," Kuroka said as her expression loosened up in relief.

"Now then, carry out your mission. Your vengeance lies right before you," Bifrons said, then declared to her in an even grander voice, "The one who killed your foster father, Raphael Hyurandell, was Chastille Lillqvist!"

"Wha—" Chastille exclaimed before catching herself.

Kuroka slowly turned toward Chastille, then pulled out a pure

white mask from her breast pocket. Chastille could tell that she was now this girl's target.

"Wait! You can't believe them! I never laid a hand on Lord Raphael!"

"Raphael...? Isn't that the one at Zagan's—" Nephteros tried to say, clearly perplexed, before being cut off.

"Don't say another word, Nephteros!" Chastille said as she stuck her finger to her lips and urged her to be quiet, to which Nephteros knit her brows.

"What... is it something we can't talk about?" Nephteros asked. It seemed she didn't know about the circumstances of how Raphael came about to serve Zagan. Even so, she was likely able to guess to an extent and held her tongue.

"...Don't worry, I don't believe what this person has to say. Luckily, you admitted to your crime earlier," Kuroka said in the tone of an executioner preparing to dole out punishment.

"Huh...? I did?" Chastille questioned Kuroka, tilting her head to the side in confusion.

"You were proudly boasting about how you killed him yesterday, weren't you?"

After wondering what she was talking about for a moment, Chastille immediately remembered what happened.

It'd sound like you're all happy he's dead to those who don't know what's going on, you know?

On that evening, she certainly did end up having an awfully misleading conversation upon hearing Alfred's report.

"You really are a wreck at the most important times..." Nephteros said with a sigh.

"Sh-Shut up!" Chastille retorted while holding back the urge to burst into tears.

"We're... done talking," Kuroka said as she donned her mask, which was engraved with a cross. That was the signal for the battle to begin. Kuroka held her shortswords at the ready, and charged in.

She really is fast! Kuroka stepped into range with a single breath, and Chastille somehow managed to fend off her shortswords using her Sacred Sword.

"Listen, calm down! This isn't the time! The chimera you cut down is still alive!"

"...Like I care. I'm only here to take revenge for that man."

If I can get her to understand that it's just a misunderstanding... However, Chastille had no way of explaining that to her in the moment, so she was out of luck. And just then, a quiet song broke out.

"[Battle gives birth to the vanquished, and rule over them beckons chaos. Panic becomes a bridle, and with no harmony nor friendship,

under the name of chaos and discord, the battlefields run rampant.]”

“Huh!?”

It was Nephteros. Upon hearing the song of celestial mysticism, Kuroka collapsed to the ground. It seemed that Nephteros split the gravitational pressure that was pushing down onto the chimera in two.

“I’ll hold her here, so go finish off that chimera!”

“Nephteros... Sorry. I owe you one,” Chastille said as she ran past Kuroka and charged in at the chimera.

“You won’t... get away...!” Kuroka barked, swinging her shortsword with her strength alone despite her body weight being multiplied severalfold.

“What!?” Nephteros raised her voice in shock as Kuroka’s shortsword severed the field of gravity itself.

It’s not... just a simple shortsword? As far as Chastille knew, the only swords that could break through celestial mysticism were Sacred Swords. There was no mistaking that Kuroka’s shortswords were extremely sharp blades, but they possessed no crests like those of a Sacred Sword. The aura of a sacred sword was granted to it by the crests carved into it using Celestian, so even if that shortsword was the Thirteenth that Zagan was talking about, there was no way it could be a Sacred Sword. And yet, how else could the power it just displayed be explained?

“I can’t let you go just because of that — Selini Chavliodous!” Nephteros exclaimed, immediately putting her next hand to play despite her surprise. Pillars of crystal jutted out all around Kuroka as if to obstruct her. And after that finished, Nephteros gestured to Chastille to tell her to keep her mouth shut.

Is she telling me... not to raise my voice? Right as Chastille figured out Nephteros’ intentions, Kuroka kicked off the crystal pillars, leaped into the air, and slipped through their gaps.

“I thought it’d come to that!” Nephteros said as she snapped her fingers. Immediately following that, the crystal pillars shattered with a noisy clang.

“Agh...” Kuroka let out a small cry, then fell to the ground while covering her ears.

I see. Her sense of hearing is so strong it can be used against her... The sound of glass shattering was sharp enough that it felt like it pierced one’s brains. If someone was subjected to that at point blank range, even a normal person’s hearing would be paralyzed. And so, in Kuroka’s case, it likely wasn’t something shallow. Thanks to Nephteros, she had surely even lost Chastille’s position. If she didn’t raise her voice, then Kuroka had no means of locating her.

Please lend me your power — Azrael! Chastille called out to her

Sacred Sword in her mind. Heeding her call, the Sacred Sword once more let out a brilliant light. However, this wasn't a technique that enveloped the sword's blade in light. Instead, it was designed to fire off light in a wide area in a similar fashion to Raphael's flames. The light pierced into the sky, and Chastille swung it down right at the chimera.

"GYIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII!" the chimera let out a repulsive scream as it writhed about. Its body visibly shrank, and the hood that had stubbornly remained affixed began falling off.

This is the end! Chastille thought. And right when she swung down her Sacred Sword at the now exposed head...

"Huh...?" Chastille muttered as she froze on the spot. She was supposed to remain silent, but she completely forgot that and let out her voice. She understood that since it had the arms and legs of a human, that its face would likely be that of a human as well. However, she never thought it would be a face that she knew...

It was the face of a girl with pointy ears, which were the characteristic features of an elf. She had slightly darkened white hair. Her skin was dark, and her seemingly sad eyes were golden. Her disheveled white hair stuck to her face, and her golden eyes seemed to possess no reason in them, yet they still let out black tears as if she were crying. It was Nephteros' face.

"Why...?" Chastille asked. She knew if she brought down her sword, she would defeat it. However, she was unable to.

Nephteros surely also saw that face, as she fell to her knees with a thud. She probably understood better than Chastille. It was without a doubt something similar to Nephteros.

Is this... something an Archdemon comes up with...? Zagan had warned her to be ready for the worst. She also thought she understood from the battle atop the ship that Bifrons was one who liked to use absolutely repulsive means. However, the 'worst' an Archdemon could come up with far surpassed what Chastille imagined.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!" the chimera let out a sorrowful shriek as its body shook. Chastille, who was still frozen, was blown away and thrown to the ground, landing on her butt.

"Lady Chastille!" one of the Angelic Knights shouted at her in an attempt to warn her. And as Chastille turned around, she caught sight of Kuroka leaping in at her with her shortswords. This time around, she didn't think it was possible to stop those blades.



"So, what's your request?"

While Chastille and Nephteros were fighting in front of the church, Zagan was still sitting in a plaza on the outskirts of town. He

was speaking with Orias, who was sitting on a bench with Kuu on her lap.

“Mm... That dark elf girl... I think she was called Nephteros?”

“Yeah. What about her?”

“Back when I met her, she asked me ‘what am I?’ I have spent quite a bit of time around sorcery, so there are many things I can tell at a single glance,” Orias said in a somewhat languid fashion.

“...You didn’t,” Zagan’s tone grew somewhat critical, to which Orias nodded apologetically.

“I noticed after I talked to her that I said something quite inconsiderate, so I chased after her in a hurry, but she seems to be quite the talented girl. I’m disappointed to say that I ended up losing sight of her. By the time I realized it, I was already within your domain.”

Zagan let out a grave sigh, and Orias looked up at him while brushing Kuu’s head.

“By the looks of it, you’ve also noticed, huh?”

“I just thought... it would’ve been nice if that wasn’t the case,” Zagan declared. Then, he finally put the truth into words in a tone that made it seem like he didn’t want to admit it, saying, “Nephteros... is a clone of Nephy.”

Within sorcery, there was a technique that was said to be capable of creating homunculi. To put it simply, it was the creation of a living being. It was power that clearly surpassed the territory of mere sorcery, and had never been perfected before.

However, it wasn’t like there weren’t any results. They were unable to create something from nothing, but they succeeded in duplicating life. Using that technique, it was possible to give birth to an existence that replicated the flesh and blood of the base subject. And depending on the way it was done, it was even supposedly possible to use the technique to swap an old body with a younger one to extend one’s lifespan.

Still, something created through such a method wasn’t a complete lifeform. The first problem was that it was unable to possess an ego of its own. The cloned body did not possess a soul or anything else required to define a sense of self. Furthermore, its mana and vitality would deteriorate rapidly. A clone’s lifespan was extremely short, and its mana and physical strength were nothing compared to the original’s. Also, perhaps due to the introduction of foreign matter, cloning lowered the efficiency of rituals that used them as sacrifices.

That’s why Nephteros was unable to withstand celestial mysticism that Nephy could use... He didn’t know how Bifrons had given her an ego, but Nephteros was definitely a clone of Nephy. That was precisely why they had the same face. And it was also why Zagan couldn’t

forgive Bifrons. After all, Bifrons had used the girl he loved to give birth to someone who had a mind of their own.

Her first memory is probably the one where she first saw Nephy... It was the image of Nephy being persecuted by other elves that Bifrons showed her in the crystal ball. That was likely a record of the past, but she probably mistook the flow of time when it was shown to her, making her think it had just occurred.

“And you just revealed the truth to Nephteros?”

“...Sorry,” Orias replied. It wasn’t like Orias was in the wrong. All she did was answer Nephteros’ question. Sure, that girl had the same face as her daughter, but she had no obligation to care about the feelings of someone she had just met.

“My request concerns that girl,” Orias said in a sincere voice.

“...And what would you have me do?” Zagan asked with a grimace.

“Zagan. Could you somehow save the girl that I ended up hurting?” Orias replied as she bowed her head deeply. This left Zagan wide-eyed in disbelief.

“Do I look like a man who would save others?”

“I’m asking you because you do.”

And how exactly am I supposed to save someone who’s found out that they were artificially created? Zagan thought as scratched his head at her reply, which seemed full of conviction. Sorcerers were beings who only ever thought about themselves. Even Zagan was utterly selfish, in that his only desire was to be loved by Nephy. Or at least, that was what he believed, but...

Dammit! Like I can just shut up and go home to Nephy after hearing that!

“Hear me, Orias. I may pay respect to you, but it’s arrogant to just assume someone needs to be saved by another. Especially when even the person in question has no way of knowing how to best help them,” Zagan responded as he mussed his hair around. He himself had been saved upon meeting Nephy. However, it wasn’t something he actively desired at that point. He never even thought of what he truly wanted back then. At the time, he would never have even dreamed that it would be to love and be loved by another.

Everything came from an unexpected encounter, and all of it completely surpassed his expectations. It was essentially a miracle. He wasn’t confident that he could replicate that for another person. Plus, it was foolish to try and bestow that upon someone who seemed unwilling, as that would only cause harm.

And yet, even though it was something he should have rejected... he knew he would feel different if it were Nephy, Foll, Raphael, Chastille, Gremory, Kimaris, or any of his subordinates at the castle...

If they were suffering, he would do everything in his power to assist them. He was certain of that simple fact.

"I believe that someone who knows that, yet is willing to try regardless is the exact type of person who can save others," Orias claimed as she looked on at Zagan's reaction with a satisfied expression on her face.

"I know I'm just repeating myself at this point, but I'm really not fit for that position," Zagan said as he let out a snort. The one Orias wanted to save was Nephteros. And honestly, he didn't have the slightest idea how to help a girl who possessed a far more ghastly past than even he or Nephy.

But that's exactly why I can't turn my back on her... Regardless of what he said, Zagan had long since made his decision. He wouldn't become a monster. Instead, he would become a king. He would give Nephy a place to live under the sun, he would bury the other twelve Archdemons, he would force the church to stop hunting down sorcerers, he would annihilate the demons, the Demon Lord, or whatever else, and he would change the world.

If he couldn't save one pitiful girl, then there was no way he would ever succeed in any of his more lofty goals. And so, after taking a deep breath, Zagan turned to face Orias once more.

"...Nephteros is a clone of Nephy. Right?"

"Yeah. Though it's painful to admit, that's exactly what she is," Orias replied.

"Then... we can think of her as Nephy's sister," Zagan said. His bride's sister was no different from his own sister. That made her family.

"Well, I suppose we can say that I've been blessed with another daughter," Orias' mouth loosened up with a smile as she responded to his statement. Zagan, in turn, simply nodded back at her. And then, he let out a shout.

"Hey, Barbatos! You can hear me, can't you!?" Zagan yelled. And as he did, the shadow of a tree in the plaza wriggled about.

"Keep it down, dammit... I'm injured here. You could at least show me a bit of sympathy."

"Like I care. More importantly, take me to Nephteros."

The shadow remained silent for a moment after being commanded. After a few moments, an annoyed voice rang out from it.

"Crap, it's looking pretty bad over there. I'll take you over, so you better do something fast."

"...Huh?"

"I'm begging you here!"

This guy's... relying on someone else? Zagan doubted his ears upon hearing that. Barbatos had once said that Zagan had changed, but it

may have been that he was also changing and just wasn't aware of that fact. That was why Zagan leaped into the shadow immediately. "Leave it to me," Zagan replied to his peerless undesirable friend. And what greeted him on the other side was...



"...Wait, what the hell is going on here?"

A blade came flying in at Zagan when he arrived on the other side. Before his eyes was a pitiful chimera with Nephteros' face, and Chastille who had fallen to the ground. It seemed she was in the middle of a battle with the chimera. And the one who was slashing in at him was... Kuroka. She was wearing a strange mask, but he could tell that it was her by her clothes and ears.

He caught the shortsword on the spur of the moment, but he couldn't avoid getting hit by the edge of the blade. It seemed to be a weapon of the church, as it hurt quite a bit as his blood ran down the blade.

"Huh...? That voice... Mister...? Why are you here?" Kuroka, still wearing that strange mask, let out a bewildered voice. Zagan didn't answer her and looked around for Nephteros instead. This seemed to be the plaza in front of the church. Angelic Knights were surrounding the area, and Nephteros was on her knees somewhat far away from the chimera itself.

Well, it's good that she's alive... After he finished verifying her safety, the chimera slowly got up.

That damn Bifrons... Did he make clones other than Nephteros? It was more apt to say that Bifrons had failed countless times in the process of creating Nephteros, and all those failures were turned into chimeras, but Zagan had no way of knowing that.

The chimera unleashed a barrage of limbs toward Zagan. The limbs were strong enough to turn an Angelic Knight into minced meat in a single blow, but Zagan lightly swung his arm into the air in response. It was a seemingly meaningless gesture, as he was nowhere close enough to the chimera's limbs let alone the chimera itself, but...

"Shut it. I'm in the middle of talking here!" Zagan exclaimed. Remarkably, his meaningless gesture drove the chimera into the ground as if his fist had hit dead center. This wasn't anything like specialized sorcery. He simply slammed his mana into it like a hammer. With just that action, the chimera was crushed and ceased moving, leaving the Angelic Knights in the area astir.

"He did in that chimera... with just a single blow..."

Apparently Chastille and the others had quite the hard fight against the chimera. All the Angelic Knights looked confused by how easily he won, and Chastille called out to him in a reproachful voice.

“Z-Zagan, that chimera is...”

“Like I care. It may look like Nephteros, but it’s not actually her,” Zagan replied. The one he had decided to save was Nephteros, not Nephys’s clones. Even if they were pitiful existences created using the same method, there was no reason for Zagan to hesitate.

“So Kuroka, what are you doing? Is this the ‘duty’ or whatever you had to do?” Zagan asked as he turned to look at Kuroka.

“It has... nothing to do... with my duty. I’ll take revenge... on this person... and kill her,” Kuroka spoke in short intervals, but still managed to reply in a cold voice.

“What did you do to this girl?” Zagan asked as he looked over to Chastille.

“I-It’s a misunderstanding. Um, it seems she’s... uh, Lord Raphael’s relative...”

From that statement alone, Zagan understood the full breadth of Bifrons’ trap.

Impressive. It’s the first time I’ve seen such intricate harassment... The daughter that Raphael spoke of referred to Kuroka. That was why Bifrons went so far as to guide her here and attack Chastille. Naturally, Raphael was unable to make a move, since he was in hiding as Zagan’s butler.

My goodness. The number of people I have to save here has just increased to two... He was still fully convinced that he wasn’t suited for such a troublesome role, but for whatever reason, only troublesome folk ever showed up before him.

“Well, I suppose if it’s arrogant to just assume someone needs saving, then there’s no problem with an Archdemon taking up that role...” Zagan unintentionally spoke to himself, then looked down at Kuroka and said, “In other words, you’re after her head because you believe Chastille killed Raphael?”

“It’s the truth. I heard... that person... talk about killing him,” Kuroka claimed as she glared at Chastille. Zagan didn’t know how things had gotten so complicated, but Chastille was simply sitting there, unable to provide a real answer.

“You’re wrong, Kuroka. She’s not the one who killed Raphael.”

“No, that can’t be!”

“I’m telling you you’re wrong, and I have undeniable proof...” Zagan struck his own chest, then continued, “After all... I’m the one who killed Raphael!”

“You’re just covering for that person, right...? Please stop that, Mister. If you say such a thing, I’ll...” Kuroka began trembling as she hesitantly responded to him.

“Now that I think of it, I never once told you my name, did I? Hear me, Kuroka! My name is Zagan!”

“...” Kuroka’s shock was visible even through her mask.

“Confused? Well then, is it easier to swallow if I name myself as one of the Archdemons? Raphael foolishly dared to raise his hand against my daughter. That’s why I killed him. Tell me, would you like to know exactly how he died?”

“Zagan! Why are you saying that!?” Chastille yelled as if criticizing him, but Zagan merely shook his head in response.

Raphael himself wanted us to fake his death... That loyal butler had decided to keep it a secret, even if it meant abandoning the only person he considered family. What kind of king would he be if he didn’t respect that wish?

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAH!” Kuroka let out a scream and swung her other shortsword as Zagan casually flung her aside. And that lone action made Kuroka’s mask tumble to the ground.

The cait sith twisted and turned in the air, managing to somehow land gracefully. But as one would expect, she could sense that she would be struck down mercilessly if she charged in directly again. Though her breathing had grown rough, she didn’t attack.

“Now then, Chastille. It looks like Kuroka is my problem. I’ll take her on. If you’d like, I’ll even clean up that chimera over there. It wouldn’t really take all that much work for me, you see... It’ll likely take some time, but I’ll even take Nephteros back with me and save her... So, what are you going to do?” Zagan called out to Chastille, almost goading her with his questions, as he watched Kuroka wait in place.

“I...”

Zagan was generous to his own subordinates, but Chastille wasn’t counted among them. She was Nephy’s friend, not Zagan’s. In that case, what was she, exactly? Was she one of the weaklings that Zagan had to protect? Or was she not?

Chastille wasn’t such a fool that she failed to understand what he was implying. She remained silent for but a mere instant before gathering her resolve and getting up on her own two feet.

“That’s none of your business, Zagan. I promised to protect Nephteros, so this child is also someone I must defeat myself,” Chastille claimed as she pointed at the chimera.

It seems I’m not even needed here, Orias.

“Very well. That’s what makes you my sworn ally,” Zagan said. This girl was a sworn ally that he could entrust his back to and fight alongside. That was why he would believe her. And just as Zagan turned to face Kuroka once more...

“Hang on now, don’t you think it’s unfair for you to cut in here?” Bifrons spoke through the chimera’s mouth, continuing with, “Zagan, allow me to give you a word of advice as your elder. You have far too

many weaknesses. Your talent is monstrous, but its not like those who follow you have kept pace with your strength... You understand what I mean, don't you?"

Several lights rose up around the plaza as Bifrons unleashed his criticism. And projected within those lights were Zagan's castle and Archdemon Palace, two location in Zagan's domain.

"No, it can't be..." Chastille spoke in a trembling voice. Zagan's subordinates were over at Archdemon Palace, and Nephy and Foll were left behind at the castle. It was likely the same scenario had occurred back when Orias defeated an Archdemon. She had lost everything she wished to protect and ended up keeping Nephy at a distance as a result.

Now it was Zagan's turn to go through that pain. He had once cast aside Nephy because he feared such a fate, but that attempt had failed entirely. Bifrons listened in on the silence as if it were pleasant, then broke into laughter.

"Fufufu, don't tell me you thought this was my only chimera? I've sent ones that are just as powerful as this one to your castle and Marchosias' Archdemon Palace. Unfortunately, there's only one of you. So, what'll you do?"

Zagan looked down at the chimera that had collapsed to the ground. He didn't know how many failures were created before Nephteros was born, but it surely didn't stop at just one or two. If all of them were turned into chimeras, then there was likely a whole hoard of them out there. And if all of them were infused with that sludge, then they were practically unstoppable.

However, I knew that from the very beginning... That was why Zagan just casually shrugged his shoulders.

"Do whatever you want. I have my hands full here already."

"Oh my... Do you think that's an idle threat? Look, I know hostages are only useful while they're alive, but I don't really care."

"Quit yapping. If you want to attack, then go right ahead. I'm busy here," Zagan coldly cut off any further part of Bifrons' speech with those words. At that, Bifrons let out a 'hmph' as if coming to an understanding.

"...I see. You've prepared for this already, huh? Well, I wonder who'll win between my chimeras and your little trap... How fun."

A chimera with countless limbs appeared within the projection. It used all of them to charge straight toward one of the two castles.

"Zagan! What are you planning? Aren't Nephy, Foll, and Ra... er, your subordinates all there!?" Chastille was all flustered, but Zagan said nothing as he simply looked up at the projection. The first one to show activity was Archdemon Palace. A golem modeled after a demon appeared from inside it. And riding on its back was Gremory, who had

taken the form of a beautiful woman.

“Keeheehee, so it really showed up.”

“Huh, isn’t that... the golem from that time...?”

It was the golem that had previously ripped off Raphael’s arm, which Zagan had repaired. The husk of the demon itself was destroyed entirely during that encounter, but techniques used to create it were left behind in Marchosias’ legacy.

To put it another way, this was a fusion of the assets of two Archdemons, Marchosias and Zagan. The beam of light fired out by the golem pierced through the chimera. However, the chimera also had a fragment of the Sludge Demon Lord inside it, which instantly restored its wounds as a pitch black sludge scattered about the area.

“It’s futile — Balor’s Evil Eye!” Gremory’s eye flashed a deep violet and reduced the chimera’s sludge to ash as she let that cry loose. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to possess enough power to finish off the chimera’s main body, as it still managed to charge in and reach the golem despite the damage it took. However, by that time, the golem’s preparations were already complete.

“You did well to get this far. Here, you may claim your reward — Heaven’s Phosphor!”

It was the name of the sorcery Zagan gave birth to that burned away at life itself. As Gremory yelled that name, the golem opened its mouth and fired a beam of light for the second time. However, the color of the light this time was as black as the void. This was something Kimaris mentioned before, but Gremory’s sorcery had poor compatibility with Heaven’s Phosphor. That was why Zagan granted this golem to her. It was something he remodeled so that it was capable of firing Heaven’s Phosphor. And, as the black beam of light came in contact with the chimera, the chimera was vaporized.

“Impossible...” Bifrons muttered in shock.

“Zagan, there’s a chimera at the castle too!” Chastille shouted at him. There were two projections, and the other one was showing a chimera charging in at Zagan’s castle. However, this particular chimera was being even more reckless than the previous one.

Tree roots crept out of the ground at its feet and held it in place. This was a trap created using Nephy’s mysticism. To escape it, one would have to use a teleportation technique like Barbatos’, or possess enough raw power to compare to an Archdemon or high elf.

I guess it was about time to teach them all a lesson... Previously, Zagan had a need to hold back against any intruders, since he wanted them to survive and tell others how little value there was in trying to attack the new Archdemon. However, there was only meaning to such a method in the beginning. By this point, those who hadn’t already learned their lesson would never learn. An Archdemon like Bifrons

was a perfect example of that fact.

In that case, it was better to shore up his defenses with traps that were fairly lethal. However, the opponent this time around was Bifrons' chimera, so that wasn't enough to stop it. The thing merely vomited out enough sludge to eat away at the tree roots in order to free itself. But by that time, the sorcerers who were left in the castle to defend it had finished their preparations, which was evident due to a gust that blew through the forest.

"Heaven's Phosphor Typhoon."

It was Kimaris, who was currently in the form of a lion.

Kimaris has pretty good compatibility with Heaven's Phosphor... The gust blowing through the forest wasn't one of wind, but Kimaris' special sound sorcery combined with Heaven's Phosphor. It was his own creation, and unique to him alone.

Upon touching what could only be expressed as a black wind, the chimera and its sludge turned to ash in an instant. Both of the chimeras that were sent to attack Zagan's bases were defeated without even getting the chance to fight back, leaving Bifrons to shout in a trembling voice.



“Impossible... Zagan, do you even understand what you did? Are you saying you shared that power with others?”

“Yeah, I did. So what?” Zagan cocked his head to the side as he asked that rhetorical question.

“I don’t understand. You just handed out a power that could even be used to kill you. What are you, an Archdemon of all people, thinking? That’s far too dangerous!”

“Humans can be killed with any ordinary blade, yet they’re still traded on the market and given to others as presents, aren’t they?” Zagan replied with a strained smile.

“Those aren’t the least bit comparable!” Bifrons bit back instantaneously.

“It isn’t all that different,” Zagan declared without hesitation.

There was no way they would ever agree on the matter, and Bifrons would never be able to change that.



With this, the only pawns Bifrons has left are the chimera here and Kuroka... Zagan looked over to the now unmasked Kuroka. Chastille said she would take care of the chimera, but this girl was the bigger problem of the two.

I mean, there’s no way I can kill Raphael’s daughter... Kuroka had her shortswords at the ready and was looking for an opening to charge in as Zagan began talking to her in a casual manner.

“I’m curious, why did you let yourself get caught by those canus if you can fight so well?”

It was somewhat baffling. Apparently, Kuroka’s blindness wasn’t really much of a handicap. And yet, she somehow got caught by some random kidnappers.

“My swords... aren’t meant to be used against people,” Kuroka replied in a cold voice. It seemed she chose who she fought against carefully due to her strength. Her swords weren’t so cheap that they could be used against mere kidnappers. Hearing her practically groan out that response, Zagan shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s one of Raphael’s teachings, I assume.”

“It’s the way of life... I was taught by that man.”

“So it’s fine to kill sorcerers? Aren’t they people too?”

“Sorcerers... aren’t people!” Kuroka screamed, clearly enraged as she leaped in at him.

This anger of hers... Did sorcerers do something to her? Sorcerers were all villains, so it was only obvious that they were despised by all the victims they left in their wake.

“Weren’t sorcerers the ones who stole the light from my eyes!?”

Kuroka roared as she slashed at Zagan, then continued with, "They killed Dad, Mom, my entire family, my entire people, and now you've even stolen Lord Raphael from me...! That man... was the only person in the world I still loved!"

It was all too common a story. Sorcerers were considered evil precisely because it happened so often.

"...Well, it's true that most sorcerers are quite inhuman," Zagan caught Kuroka's shortsword barehanded as he replied in a nonchalant manner.

"Huh!?"

Kuroka exclaimed in surprise. At that moment, she finally realized that not a single one of her countless slashes had reached Zagan.

"...Sorcery," Kuroka sharply muttered. Then, countless specks of light surrounded Zagan like snow.

"Heaven's Scale Snowfield... It would be difficult for even a Sacred Sword to break through this," Zagan proclaimed. Each and every one of Kuroka's strikes were obstructed by those lights. Zagan had already perfected Heaven's Scale in its dragon form, so the snowfield wasn't something he invented for his own use.

Foll should be able to handle it, but its weakness is that you can't move when you're in the middle of it... In exchange for not granting Foll Heaven's Phosphor, Zagan created this sorcery for her. However, there was still room for improvement. He dared to use it here as a test run, but it was also something that was useful when attempting to defend a wide area.

There's too many damn Angelic Knights around... From their perspective, they were acting out of necessity to prevent any damage from spreading to the town, but they were actually a complete hindrance. At this point, Kuroka also seemed to have realized the effective range of this version of Heaven's Scale and made a confused expression.

"Why is a sorcerer... doing something like protecting Angelic Knights?"

"Who knows? Is that something you need to know in order to enact your revenge?"

It was just some light provocation, but Kuroka's face twisted with anger as she slashed in at Zagan once more. Zagan let go of the shortsword he caught and let her go wild as much as she liked.

"What's wrong? I'll have you know that Raphael was able to break through this Heaven's Scale. Is this as far as your desire for revenge goes?" Zagan inquired. Thinking back on it, the only one who was capable of breaking through Heaven's Scale head-on was Raphael.

That's all the more reason that I have to properly respond to his devotion... That was why Zagan stepped forth to face Kuroka.

“I can somewhat sympathize with your circumstances. However, I don’t have the spare time to keep you company forever,” Zagan said as he pushed the snowfield against Kuroka. And pressured by the particles of light, Kuroka jumped back a great distance.

“You listening? Just once. I’ll permit your attack just once. If your sword does not reach me, then give up and go home. If you can’t grasp this one chance, then it will be impossible for you to ever beat me,” Zagan said. He hadn’t once raised his hand against her. All he was doing was allowing Kuroka to vent her anger, so it couldn’t even be called a fight. She had surely also sensed this by now, as her tightly sealed lips were trembling. Next, she turned to her surroundings as if taken aback. And then, as if her resolute attacks had all been a lie, her body began trembling in fear.

“Haaah... Haaah... Haaah...” Kuroka breathed roughly as sweat began to drench her entire body. Zagan could tell exactly was going on within her.

I’m an expert when it comes to revenge, after all... After swinging her sword so much, he was completely unharmed. Even if she didn’t want to, it was easy for her to understand the difference in power between them. Nevertheless, Zagan was giving her one last chance. A last chance where she was permitted to perform a completely one-sided attack, one that was impossible to fail.

In other words, she was at a standstill. If this were to turn into a real fight, she would simply die. She would accomplish nothing, leave behind nothing, and be remembered by none. Once she came to a stop, she had no choice but to look that reality in the eye.

“Do you understand now? This is revenge. The fear you feel right now is the price for revenge,” Zagan called out to her in a strict tone. Most people who sought revenge managed to bury that fear due to their anger. However, they simply forgot it, so it wasn’t like they conquered it. And if they were unable to conquer it, they would never become an expert like Zagan.

In the end, Kuroka’s desire for vengeance was more than valid, but she was a complete novice. She only knew how to challenge her target in a fair fight. With that strategy, she wouldn’t be able to persist and exhaust herself if she didn’t win. She was far too unfamiliar with the concept, which made Zagan give her an introduction to the basics.

If he was in her place, Zagan would use all his powers to drive his target into a corner. After all, revenge could only be considered properly enacted upon taking one’s target, drowning them in despair, trampling on their very existence, and cornering them to the point where they begged for death.

For that purpose, it was necessary to conquer one’s fear and keep a composed mind. Even if Kuroka somehow managed to kill Zagan,

with the way she was doing it, nothing would be left. She would be empty, and upon losing her only goal in life, she would just silently wait for death. There was no way that Raphael wished for such a conclusion, and that was why Zagan spoke to her in a provocative manner.

“What’s wrong? Are you giving up already?”

Kuroka, who looked to be falling into the depths of despair, trembled with a start. And after closing her eyes, she took a quiet breath. Then, her hands stopped trembling as she held her shortswords at the ready.

“...Hey, Mister, did you find Kuu?” Kuroka asked. She had a composed tone. Those were the words of someone who had actually managed to conquer their fear.

“Yeah, don’t worry about that. She’s fine. Once she wakes up, she probably won’t even remember any of the bad things that happened.”

“You really are kind after all, Mister. If possible, I would’ve liked to meet in a different way than this,” Kuroka said, a faint smile on her face. Then, she corrected her stance and held her shortswords in an underhand grip, declaring, “I’m Kuroka Adelhide. I’ll be taking revenge for my father, Raphael Hyurandell... Here I come!”

Kuroka charged in with her blade hidden behind her back. It was a stance that made it impossible to read whether an attack was coming from the right or left. Once she got into range, her first move started with her right arm. Based on that observation, it may have been possible to sever her right arm before she finished swinging. However, she didn’t swing the shortsword in her right hand.

A feint? It was likely a feint that sacrificed her right arm. The attack, which was loaded with her drive to deliver a killing blow, was the one with the shortsword in her left hand. It was a gamble that occurred in an interval shorter than the blink of an eye. The Angelic Knights in the area surely saw Kuroka swinging both shortswords at the same time, and those terrifying swords closed in on Zagan. And then...

“Huh...?”

The one who let out their voice... was Kuroka. Her face was wet from a spurt of bright red blood as both swords... stabbed right into Zagan’s chest without erring from their mark.

“Wh...y...?” Kuroka muttered. He had clearly seen the swords. He could have stopped them with his snowfield. However, Zagan didn’t even attempt to dodge or block them.

Ugh... It really hurts... The blades were obstructed by his strengthened muscles, so they didn’t reach his heart, but they severed his bones and gouged out his entrails. Plus, the shortswords seemed to possess a similar power to a Sacred Sword, which made him unable to

regenerate his wounds using sorcery. With blood flowing from his mouth, Zagan pulled out Kuroka's shortswords.

"Why... didn't you dodge? No, even if you didn't... you should have been able to block it with your sorcery, Mister," Kuroka mumbled, seemingly unable to understand what was happening.



“I said that I would permit your attack,” Zagan replied resolutely despite how painful the mere act of speaking was to him at the moment. Permitting it meant that he would accept it. Dodging or blocking it with sorcery wasn’t accepting it. That was why Zagan intended to take the full brunt of her attack from the very beginning. The fact that the wound was far more serious than he imagined just went to show how powerful Kuroka was.

“Wha—” Kuroka, who stood there in bewilderment, exclaimed as Zagan stretched out his hand to her. He remained silent as he gently embraced the trembling girl.

“Raphael was a strong and proud Angelic Knight. He’s the only man I truly respect from the bottom of my heart. That man told me... the daughter that had no connection to him by blood was more important to him than anyone else,” Zagan spoke to her in a quiet voice, which made the ears atop Kuroka’s head quiver.

Even now, you’re loved by Raphael. Notice it already... Those were the words that Zagan wished to convey to her.

“Wh... y...?” Kuroka mumbled, her face covered in tears. And with a thud, she feebly struck Zagan’s chest and continued, “Why, Mister...?” Kuroka bellowed as she threw her tiny fist against him before finally finishing her question by asking, “Why didn’t you save Lord Raphael when you’re so strong!?”

Unfortunately, all Zagan could do was continue to embrace the girl who was crying and yelling like a child.



Nephteros was sitting on the ground, grasping her knees, as the fight between Zagan and Kuroka settled down.

I am... Nephelia’s clone... Bifrons had obtained several strands of Nephelia’s hair from the hidden elven village and used them as a base to create Nephteros. That was the truth she heard from Archdemon Orias.

She was something that was created, a tool that could be replaced at any time. Once she found that out, Nephteros ran away from Bifrons. She never thought she would be able to get away, but she felt that was her only choice if she wanted to survive. And as a result, Bifrons let a chimera loose to hunt her, and Nephteros’ life on the run began in earnest. It was painful, but there were many people on the way who helped her. It seemed the world wasn’t as wretched a place as Nephteros initially thought, and she felt like she grasped a thin thread of hope within it.

But it’s useless. I can’t bear this anymore... The chimera that Chastille was fighting was also Nephteros. It didn’t just have the same

face as her. It had the same form, the same blood, the same flesh, and it was even made in the exact same way. Everything about it was the same. The only difference was the order in which they were born.

The Nephteros before her eyes was strung up like a toy, had her body violated by that sludge, and was turned into a chimera. The fact that she was alive, her meager pride that she could tell others she was Nephteros, had been trampled on and violated. Archdemon Bifrons was inhuman. Nephteros thought that she understood that already, but she didn't previously believe it possible to trample on the foundations of humanity to such an extent.

"I won't let you take Nephteros!" Chastille roared, making her desire to protect Nephteros plain as day.

If I don't help her... she won't stand a chance of winning... A desire to help Chastille began welling up within Nephteros. Those feelings possessed a strength which stirred up her body, and she began hearing voices.

"You should be supporting Chastille. Chant your celestial mysticism," they said. However, the image of the chimera was reflected in her eyes.

"Urgh... Ack... Ugh..." Nephteros groaned as she vomited. She wasn't strong enough to remain sane upon being shown such ghastly sights. And still unable to stand on her own two feet, she saw Zagan standing before her. Perhaps because that girl called Kuroka was quite the difficult opponent, his entire body was covered in blood. She had never seen him in such a state, even after the battle atop that ship, or when he stood against Archdemon Orias.

"You're being quite docile today," Zagan said, shrugging his shoulders.

"..." Nephteros couldn't answer, so Zagan moved to stand next to her. His gaze was pointed at Chastille as she swung her Sacred Sword in battle. That girl was certainly strong, but even the person in question likely knew she couldn't beat the chimera alone.

How can that girl keep fighting...? She already knew the answer. That girl was able to fight so desperately because of her desire to protect others.

"...Please, save that girl. It would be no big deal for you, right?" Nephteros begged as she grabbed hold of Zagan's clothes. She felt she was unable to fight. No matter how repulsive its figure was, that chimera was also Nephteros. The only reason she wasn't like that herself was because of luck. If she was any less fortunate, then she would be in its place. There was no way she could attack herself, especially not when she couldn't even look it in the eyes.

"I spoke with Orias," Zagan said as he placed his hand on her head with a thud. That statement made her realize he knew about the

truth she had discovered. Well, it was pretty easy to tell upon seeing that chimera, and Zagan likely already knew from the beginning and just kept it a secret, but that was neither here nor there.

Unfortunately, the despair of having a secret she never wished to be revealed discovered crept up her legs.

"It seems she's decided to think of you as her own daughter," Zagan told her quietly.

"Daughter...?" Nephteros stared back at him blankly, unable to understand why he was telling her such things.

"Thinking of your growth, it could even be said that you're Neph's little sister, though you may hate the thought. And my bride's little sister is also my little sister," Zagan stated in a clear tone. Then, he looked straight into Nephteros' eyes with his silver gaze and continued, "I'll protect you from that chimera, and from Bifrons too," Zagan declared. His words were thoroughly reassuring, and promising, but... "However, that's only after Chastille is defeated."

"Wh-Why? Isn't she your ally?"

"That is a human I have acknowledged as a sworn ally. And she said she would fight. She does not desire help from me. If I were to force my way in to save her, I would dishonor her trust," Zagan claimed as he looked down at Nephteros with a strict gaze.

"But..." Nephteros muttered. At the current rate, Chastille would die. That much was clear to her.

"You decide for yourself, Nephteros. Will you plug your ears and wait for her to perish? Or do you go and save your friend yourself?" Zagan asked as he kneeled down in front of Nephteros. It went without saying that she wanted to save Chastille. But that was unreasonable. She couldn't face that thing.

"I want to... save her..."

"Then be quick about it. It seems she's almost at her limit," Zagan said. However, she couldn't even look at that chimera. As she cast her gaze to the ground, Zagan stood in a way that blocked her entire field of vision.

"Will this do?"

He's... really protecting me... Nephteros stared at him in wonder. That was why Nephteros clung to his back and finally began chanting.

"[Thou art he who rules over terror. Accompanied by the god of war, become he who brings about destruction and chaos.]"

The chimera, which was thrusting its limbs out at Chastille, was once more pinned to the ground. However, that chimera was still a high elf, so it struggled as it began breaking through her celestial mysticism using sheer strength.

"[Battle gives birth to the vanquished, and rule over them beckons chaos. Panic becomes a bridle, and with no harmony nor friendship,

under the name of chaos and discord, the battlefields run rampant.]”

Nephteros strengthened the pressure, but the chimera let out black tears as it stretched out its limbs. It looked like it was begging for salvation, and this dulled Chastille’s strikes. And, as if using that opening, the chimera flung an arm at her.

“I won’t let you!” Kuroka roared as two shortswords came in and severed that arm. It wasn’t clear whether her misunderstanding with Chastille had been cleared up, but it seemed she’d at least decided to build a united front against the chimera. She mowed down its limbs in the blink of an eye, but the chimera still vomited out sludge as if clinging to life.

“It’s futile — Azrael!” Chastille declared as the Sacred Sword’s light burned the sludge, giving Nephteros’ enough time to complete her celestial mysticism.

“[Such is the bell’s toll that crushes the soul] — Phobos Ichos!”

If I can weaken it with this, then Chastille’s Sacred Sword can defeat it! That was what Nephteros wholeheartedly believed, but her celestial mysticism didn’t activate.

A misfire? From the very beginning, the burden of celestial mysticism was far too great for Nephteros. But still, she had always been able to use Phobos Ichos. However, now it seemed she was unable to do even that.

Upon realizing that wasn’t the case, she turned pale.

“Wh-What the?” Chastille muttered in confusion. Her Sacred Sword shined a pallid blue light. The same happened to Kuroka’s shortswords. Nephteros could tell that this was the celestial mysticism she intended to fire at the chimera.

“Cut it!” Zagan yelled. Just from that, Chastille and Kuroka both understood what they were supposed to do.

“With this...”

“...it’s over!”

The Sacred Sword and shortswords tore into the beast. Immediately following that, the chimera’s body was swallowed into a black orb. Nephteros could tell that it was a bundle of gravity so powerful that it was visible. And after that orb vanished, there was nothing left behind.

What... is this power...? It was something that clearly surpassed Nephteros’ own power. Having said that, it wasn’t the Sacred Sword’s power either. As she stood there dumbfounded, Chastille came running over, and she immediately separated herself from Zagan.

“Nephteros, are you alright?”

“Well, of course I am. I was far away from the actual battle, remember?” Nephteros replied in astonishment.

“Sorry. This is about all I could think of doing for you,” Chastille

replied as she embraced her for odd reason.

“What are you talking about...?”

“It’s alright. I’m here by your side.”

For some reason, Nephteros’ vision distorted upon hearing that. And that was when she noticed... that tears were falling from her own eyes.

“H-Huh? Why...?” Chastille put more strength into her arms in attempt to combat what she assumed was a display of her sadness. It was to the point where it hurt, but for some reason, it was relieving, so it made Nephteros lose all strength in her body.

Before she knew it, Nephteros was crying loudly. And tempted by that, Chastille burst into tears as well.

“This is far too cruel... How can the world be so cruel...?”

Oh, it’s not because this girl is sad herself... Is she crying for me? She never once thought that another person would do such a thing on her behalf. And so, Nephteros felt like she had been saved by her fateful meeting with Chastille.

Unfortunately, the two girls who were crying in each other’s arms were caught up in their own little world. That was why neither of them noticed that Zagan had all of a sudden vanished, and that upon departing, his face was twisted with rage.



“...What a failure. To think I wouldn’t be able to retrieve Nephteros or Azazel...” Bifrons stamped their feet in frustration while biting down on a thumbnail, then continued by saying, “This isn’t the least bit amusing! Still, it is interesting! What was that right at the end? That wasn’t simply the power of celestial mysticism. Did it sympathize... no, resonate with the Sacred Sword? Hm, this requires further research.”

Even after having all their pawns destroyed, Archdemon Bifrons didn’t learn a single lesson. And then, the androgynous Archdemon burst into laughter.

“Kufufu, Zagan really is quite fun. As for Nephteros... Well, I’ll leave her for later. Shall I just make a substitute in the meantime?” Bifrons said while donning a wicked smile, perhaps having thought of their next sinister plot. However, a large hand slammed into their head with a thud at that exact moment.

“You seem to be in quite the good mood, Bifrons,” Zagan stated, standing there with bloodshot eyes as Bifrons turned around to see him.

“...Huh? Zagan? How did you get here?”

“Do you think I have any reason to answer you?” Zagan replied, though the trick was rather simple. All he did was find traces of

Bifrons' mana and use Barbatos' sorcery to teleport over.

"Oh dear? Are you maybe... angry?" Bifrons' mouth popped open with a dry laugh as they asked that question.

"Not at all. I just came to accomplish what I said I would. I'll have you go to hell right here and now," Zagan strengthened his grip with the intent of crushing Bifrons' skull as he made his purpose clear.

"Aahahahah! Hellish landscapes are my favorite, you know!? Just like this!" Bifrons responded with shrill laughter. And then, sludge crept out of the surrounding walls.

This idiot still has a lot left in stock... Well, that was why Zagan came alone in the first place. He put enough strength into his grip to hold Bifrons in place, and held his other hand out to the sky.

"Heaven's Phosphor Autumn Lightning."

Immediately following that, lightning fell from the sky. It split into countless black branches and tore apart the sludge, which made Bifrons' entire base collapse in turn.

It can't compare to the Fivefold Grand Flower in penetrative power, but its area of effect is far greater... There was nothing left behind after the lightning subsided. No sludge, no base, no research results, nothing. That sorcery, which burned mana itself, reduced absolutely everything to dust. With this, the medium that Bifrons used as a source to create Nephteros should also have been annihilated. And even Bifrons' barrier, which was set up around the entire area using all the wisdom they accumulated, was demolished. In other words, all that was left here was a naked sorcerer.

"It seems you won't die even if I crush your skull here, but I wonder if you'd survive a point blank Heaven's Phosphor?"

"Haha... You're better off not killing me here. There's far too much knowledge you'll lose on celestial mysticism."

"Not interested," Zagan drove Bifrons' head into the ground as he said that, and a splash of blood came from beneath his hand.

"Ouch, that looked painful," Barbatos said as he broke into laughter from within the shadows. This time around, he had also been forced to go through quite the terrible experience.

This guy's unusually angry. I wonder why... Zagan's foolish, undesirable friend was acting like something very important to him had been hurt. That was why Zagan didn't say anything and brought him along.

"Gak... Hak..." Bifrons groaned, somehow still alive. Hearing that, Zagan let go of Bifrons' head and raised his right hand overhead. Bifrons was trying to put some sort of defense in place, but since Bifrons was a sorcerer, there was nothing they could do but use sorcery. And there was no sorcery that Zagan couldn't devour.

When the sorcery dissipated in vain, doing naught but

strengthening his power, Zagan drove his fist downward. The earth split and quaked. The shockwave reached all the way to the neighboring town faster than any horse could, and rocked the entire region and blew away what little debris there was left of Bifrons' base. It was a destructive scene that made one think a meteor had landed.

However, Bifrons' body remained. Zagan's fist had missed Bifrons' face and hit the ground next to their head.

"Hee... Hee..." Bifrons was trembling with a clatter.

"I thought it'd be fine to just kill you here, but I've changed my mind."

"Heehee, you'll regret not killing me — GYAAAH!?"

Zagan plunged his hand into Bifrons' chest as the sorcerer began laughing, cutting them off.

"I planted Heaven's Phosphor in your heart. It's set to activate if you break a certain rule," Zagan stated. Basically, it was a contractual sorcery.

"Isolation... That is the punishment I shall grant you. I'll be taking charge of Nephteros. You're not permitted to show yourself before her, talk to her, or convey your intent to her. Slowly have a taste of the hell known as loneliness."

"Hahaa... Here I was wondering what you were going to say, and you make it something that simple... Nephteros is quite the precious specimen, but you must know that I can just make a substitute."

"I'll let you know one thing here. Homunculi have short lifespans. If someone doesn't continuously supply them with mana, they won't even survive three days. However, that never happened to Nephteros," Zagan said as looked down at Bifrons with a faint look of pity in his eyes. Such were the limits of current cloning techniques. And yet, Nephteros was still alive. Even though she was chased by a chimera for several days on end without getting any water or sleep, she survived.

"That's because you supplied her with mana. You protected her, keeping her from the embrace of death. The truth is, you're attached to Nephteros," Zagan said. If all Bifrons cared for was retrieving her, he could have just cut off her supply of mana and gotten it done easily. If the goal was to kill her, then the same thing could be done. And yet, that never happened.

"Heehee, well, it's not any fun if she dies so easily. It's easy to get attached to a nice toy."

"You really don't get it, do you? Being attached to another... is what people call love," Zagan replied.

"You're saying... I love Nephteros?" Bifrons looked completely dumbfounded, as if looking at something completely outrageous, as they said that. Of course, this sorcerer's love was twisted. Forcing a

one-sided love on another wouldn't make anyone happy. There was also no way Nephteros would accept it. Such were human emotions, and there was no good or evil when it came to emotions. Love had nothing to do with such concepts. Even so, this sorcerer came to know of the emotion of loving another.

Losing the person you love... is hell itself.

The sense of emptiness Zagan felt upon forcing Nephy away from him.

The despair Orias felt upon losing everything she wished to protect.

The hatred Kuroka felt upon losing Raphael.

All of them were stuck in a hell without salvation... And that was why Zagan didn't kill Archdemon Bifrons.

"That's all I had to say," Zagan vanished, leaving those words behind.

"How stupid. I don't understand. Well, that may also be one of Zagan's interesting sides... Fufufu..." Bifrons put a hand to their own chest as they said that, laying on the ground all the while.

However, despite that, the sorcerer didn't even realize that they were seized by a feeling of a large hole opening within their heart.

Epilogue

Several days after the chimera incident, Kuroka was sitting down in the plaza in front of the church, seemingly at a complete loss.

What should I do now...? Was she to try to avenge Raphael even now? At the very least, she didn't feel any desire to keep hounding Zagan after all that had happened. It may have been true that he killed Raphael, but at the same time, he clearly held a deep sense of respect for him.

Raphael was definitely not killed in some vile and underhanded manner, so it was difficult for her to hate a man who said he respected him. Kuroka's desire for revenge had come to an end. However, having lost that goal, she no longer had any idea what to do. Was there even a purpose to working at the church when Raphael was nowhere to be found?

Plus, it's hard for me to even face Lady Chastille at this point... After Zagan had explained things, Kuroka was convinced that Chastille had only caused a misunderstanding and had nothing to do with Raphael's death. Though she did have doubts as to why Chastille had said such misleading things in the first place, she was far too embarrassed to bring that up after she had already attempted to take her life. And that mishmash of awkward circumstances made it hard for Kuroka to work as Chastille's subordinate.

However, after making an unreasonable transfer request, it was also difficult for her to return to the church she was originally affiliated with. Kuu had told her to stay in town with a smile, but there were far too many problems for Kuroka to simply accept that.

Unable to find an answer, Kuroka let out a sigh. Then, a large shadow suddenly cast out before her. It seemed that they were looking for a bench. The plaza had been thoroughly trashed by the battle with the chimera, so the only place to sit was the bench Kuroka was currently occupying.

"Please take a seat," Kuroka said as she scooted over on the bench to make space. The one before her was likely a man. Judging from the sound, he seemed to be wearing bulky armor. The sound it made was relatively light compared to that of the Anointed Armor Angelic Knights wore, but the man's movement still rang out loudly. She assumed the man was rather large and strong, as he managed to move around in that attire with little problem.

Hm, how odd... This is... a really nostalgic smell... It was a smell that she had to have known quite well, but with her mind all muddled, Kuroka was unable to recognize it. The man bowed his head with a clank from his armor, then sat down next to Kuroka.

Silence. Kuroka had lost her way and was simply sitting there in a daze, but before long, the man spoke to her in a troubled tone.

“Hmm... Are you in good health, Kuroka?”

It was a far too nostalgic voice, yet one that she should have been unable to hear ever again.

“Huh... Huh? No way... That voice is... Rafmmm!” Kuroka’s eyes shot wide open as she attempted to call out his name. However, the man pinned down her mouth.

“I am Valefor. That man is dead already.”

Kuroka’s chest tightened up as she found herself unable to speak. The way he spoke in an awkward manner that was filled with an overbearing sense of kindness made it clear that it was the voice of the man Kuroka knew.

“Owing to certain circumstances, I am currently serving under Archdemon Zagan. It’s quite the noisy place, but I’m doing quite well in my own way there,” the armored man said as he scratched his cheek, making metallic noises due to his bulky armor.

He knew everything... and even saved Lord Raphael... yet said nothing... and accepted all my complaints... Kuroka clung to the armored man and nodded repeatedly as she pondered Zagan’s motives. Why exactly was he willing to go so far to help others? He was supposed to be a heinous sorcerer.



“Do you intend... to go back to the dark side?” the armored man muttered as if searching for the right words to say.

Kuroka had belonged to Azazel before she even lost her eyesight. That was because her entire people were slaughtered by a sorcerer, and she was invited to join their ranks because of her physical abilities and the overwhelming hatred she had of sorcerers.

However, Kuroka failed during her duties and lost her eyesight. At that time, Raphael took her in, provided her with tender care, and used the shortwords she used during her time in Azazel to make a sword cane for her.

Raphael began moving to change the ways of the church due to his disdain for the branches of it that used children as weapons. No longer able to fight and left in low spirits, Kuroka was saved by him. And then, once she had gotten accustomed to walking with a cane and was able to once more use her shortwords, news of Raphael’s death reached her ears.

“I was planning to, but it looks like I did something careless again...” Kuroka shook her head numbly as she said that. She had felt from the very beginning that the voice whispering in her ear was one she couldn’t trust. However, the higher-ups of Azazel were all people like that. She knew that they were using her with some sort of goal in mind, but Kuroka was willing to do anything to avenge Raphael.

Incidentally, that ‘voice’ was apparently the voice of a sorcerer who had nothing to do with Azazel. Though she was desperate, it really was quite shameful of her to listen to it.

It was difficult for her to return to Azazel as she was now. Having said that, she didn’t know if it was fine for her to stay at this church, either. And seeing Kuroka’s dilemma, Raphael offered a suggestion.

“If you have nowhere else to go, why not come with me? My liege is a man with a wide bosom. He would surely receive you as well.”

That’s why that Mister brought my dad here... A throbbing pain assaulted Kuroka’s heart once more.

Kuroka still didn’t know what exactly had happened to him. Nevertheless, she understood that he was in a position where he had to hide the fact that he was alive. That was why Zagan and Chastille didn’t tell her about it. And now he was letting her meet with Raphael and was even giving her a new place to stay. Raphael calling him ‘a man with a wide bosom’ seemed entirely justified.

“...Your invitation makes me really happy, Dad. I’m also... thankful to him...”

“Then...”

“That’s why... I’ll pass on that,” Kuroka replied, accompanying her words with a shake of her head. Then, she smiled like she was about

to break into tears and said, "If he shows me more kindness, I'll definitely fall in love with him."

She knew from their very first meeting that he already had a woman he loved. Being so immature, she would surely just become a burden to him if she stayed by his side.

"I'll start back from square one and try my best over there. I don't know if the people will accept me, but I think it's something I have to do," Kuroka said as she turned to the church behind her.

Raphael said nothing, and gently brushed Kuroka's head. And in response, Kuroka grasped his kind hand.

"I'll come to visit you, Dad. Since you came to cheer me up when I was down, next time I'll come over and do the same for you!"

"I see. I'll be looking forward to it, then."

So ends the long-awaited reunion between an awfully odd father and daughter.



"Miss Nephteros ended up staying at Chastille's place?" Nephy asked, smiling in relief as Zagan told her of the details of what happened in town. With an elbow planted on his throne, Zagan made a strained smile down at the lovely girl embracing his lap.

"Yeah. They seem to get along quite well now," Zagan replied. He had attempted to invite her to live at his castle, but when he did, Nephteros was tightly squeezing onto the hem of Chastille's clothes and wouldn't let go.

"It's good fortune that she was able to find someone who would cry for her sake," Zagan claimed, believing that may have been the same as being saved by someone. At the very least, Zagan himself was saved because Nephy cried for him. It wasn't something just anyone could do. Sure, Zagan intended to shelter Nephteros, but he had no confidence that he could shed a tear for her.

Chastille was different from him in that respect. After finding out about Nephteros' circumstances, she wailed like it was something that had happened to her. There wasn't a hint of selfishness to her actions, as she was truly crying from her heart. That was why Nephteros was able to regain her footing.

"Then... what about the other group...? What happened to Kuroka and Kuu?" Nephy asked as the tips of her pointy ears quivered.

In the end, I guess I couldn't get any information on Azazel from the church... Zagan thought, unable to answer her right away.

A secret organization that took on the name of the Thirteenth that shouldn't have existed in order to assassinate both internal and external enemies of the church. That was the dark side of the church, Azazel. It seemed they trained children like Kuroka who had no

relatives to be their soldiers, and because of that, Raphael had been chasing them.

Zagan had ended up right back at his starting point with regards to the Thirteenth. However, he still had one worry about it.

Nephteros' celestial mysticism resonated not only with Chastille's Sacred Sword, but with Kuroka's shortswords as well... He had read a note saying a high elf's power could be used to amplify the strength of a Sacred Sword, but why did it work with those shortswords?

"It seems the two of them will stay at the church. Well, Chastille should be able to put them to good use, right?" Zagan answered as he shook off such lingering thoughts. It wasn't clear whether Orias actually erased Kuu's memories or not. However, it didn't look like there was a single cloud over her smile when she was with Kuroka.

"Master Zagan. That's why you sent Raphael out on an errand, right?" Nephy's asked, her ears quivering as if she found his answer strange. In response, Zagan simply averted his gaze as if to feign ignorance, then took a deep breath.

He had already made preparations as to where they would walk. He had taken care of Bifrons, who seemed like the type to get in the way. And, he had even resolved the issues with Nephteros to an extent, which were the root of Nephy's anxieties.

In that case, isn't this the perfect time to invite her!?

"Anyway, Nephy!"

"Yes?" Nephy responded, looking straight into his eyes with an innocent expression on her face.

"This case with Bifrons has been settled, so I was thinking things may calm down for a while," Zagan said as both of them blushed and turned pale.

"I see..." Nephy stared at him with a puzzled expression on her face, but her cheeks turned even more red, as if she was expecting something.

Ugh, is this Nephy showing her affection for me despite being all flustered? Her eyes were telling him that she would wait no matter how long it took. And so, after clearing his throat in a grand manner, Zagan spoke with resolve.

"Hear me, Nephy! Would you like to try going on that date or whatever it's called?"

"Yes. With pleasure," Nephy replied without a single moment's hesitation.

"Huh? R-Really? No, before that, do you even know what a date is?"

"I don't know the meaning of that word, but I will do anything that you desire, Master Zagan," Nephy said as she shook her head. Unfortunately, her dangerous words had left Zagan at his wit's end.

I thought that would be the case... Even Zagan didn't know what the word date meant before Gremory and Foll taught him about it. The environment Nephy grew up in was pretty similar to his, so there was a lot that both of them didn't know. However, Zagan was far too embarrassed to tell her what it was in a straightforward manner. That was why he mumbled out a crude explanation because of how nervous he felt.

"That thing called a date, is, um, you see... Well, it's apparently what people call... a man and woman in love walking around town... buying things... and going around with just the two of them together."

"I see... Huh?" Nephy muttered, her ears turned bright red right to their tips as she took in the meaning of his explanation. She then covered her face as if finally unable to bear it any longer, but eventually looked up at Zagan through the gaps in her fingers.

"With pleasure. I'll accompany you anywhere you want," Nephy finally replied in a wistful, near silent voice.

It wasn't clear whether the way he invited her on a date or her reply was correct or not, but with that, the two of them ended up setting off on their first date.

Afterword

It's been a while. This is Fuminori Teshima here with *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 5*.

Going into this volume, Zagan can finally call himself Nephys's man! But, as expected, he has no idea what to do. At the same time, Nephteros, who previously vanished, is on the run from Bifrons. And the one who saves her is the gallant Maiden of the Sacred Sword. When the cold dark elf meets the crybaby, the secrets of the Sacred Sword may just be unraveled!

Anyway, that's the gist of volume 5. Sorry, it's pretty bulky. I even shaved off about 50 pages, but we still ended up going over 350. I've caused quite a lot of problems for my chief editor, K.

Also, starting in February, the manga adaptation of Elf Bride will be made available on the internet. The artist is Hako Itagaki. Thanks to him, the manga is quite popular, so I'm jumping for joy as the original author. It'll be updated every month, so please look forward to that as well!

Incidentally, progress on the next volume is going well, and I think I'll have something out by summer. Next time Zagan will shrink! Foll will grow! All sorts of new races will show up! And good old granny Gremory will be overjoyed!? Maybe!

Now then, allow me to offer my gratitude to all those that have helped me.

To my chief editor, K, who I really troubled a lot this time around. To the illustrator, COMTA, who provided such delicate and beautiful illustrations (Kuroka is cute, but Kuu is even cuter). To Hako Itagaki, who took charge of the manga adaptation. To the editors at Comic Fire. To everyone involved in the cover design, proofreading, and PR. To my dear children, who have been running about and even taking care of my laundry and other household chores on my behalf. And to you, my dear readers, who have taken this book in hand. Thank you very much!

March 2018: Enjoying Lunch After Finishing My Taxes —
Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

A Common Sickness

"It's unusual to see you in the castle, Sir Barbatos," Kimaris said as he happened across Barbatos at night, alone in the kitchen knocking back a drink.

"Huh? Kimaris? Oh, yeah, guess I haven't talked with you all that much."

"...Did something happen? You don't look well," Kimaris asked. Barbatos was usually a vulgar, loudmouthed individual, but currently, he was acting rather docile.

"Well, I guess... The other day, I got cut up by that Azazel guy, and I've been feeling out of it since. I thought it was some church curse or something and came to get Zagan's bride to give me a checkup, but she said there was nothing wrong with me."

"...What manner of symptoms do you have? I'll assist you if I am able," Kimaris replied. Unable to ignore Barbatos after seeing him act so meek, he took a seat next to him.

"Let's see... I guess you could call it irregular heart palpitations? Don't know why, but my heart keeps beating like crazy. Oh, my head gets all hot when I'm not even pissed. It's weird. Well, at least it's not so bad that sorcery can't fix it, but when it happens so many times a day..."

Kimaris' expression turned grim as he pinched his brow. A foolish thought passed through his mind when he pondered Barbatos' dilemma.

"Sir Barbatos, could it be that at such times... a lady was nearby?"

"A woman? Well, yeah, I am a bodyguard right now, so that crybaby's always around... Hm, hold on. Now that I think of it, I feel like most of these spasms happen when I look at her face."

"Um, Sir Barbatos. This is mere conjecture, but I think you just have measles. It is a light sickness that every human experiences at least once in their lives, and will pass in time, so there's no need for you to worry."

"Really? What a relief. Thanks for the help, man. You're a good guy. I'll treat you to some nice booze next time around."

"I look forward to it," Kimaris responded. And upon seeing that Barbatos had regained some of his spirit, he made a firm vow to himself.

I must keep this a secret from Miss Gremory!

A Daughter's Confusion

"Raphael, did Zagan and Nephy fight?" Foll asked when she dropped by the kitchen while Raphael was in the middle of making preparations for dinner. Raphael honestly doubted his ears. The thought of those two fighting seemed silly.

"Hm... Why do you believe they are?"

"They've been acting weird since we visited the hidden elf village. They don't look each other in the eyes, and when they talk they stop right away. It's like they're avoiding each other... Seeing them not get along makes my test feel tight..." Foll muttered sadly, leading Raphael to let out a groan.

"Err, Foll, that is incorrect. It's not like they hate each other now. In fact, they have the exact opposite problem. They most likely don't know how to act now that they've confirmed their love for each other."

Raphael didn't know what exactly happened, since he'd been asked to watch the castle, but he believed that some event occurred where the two of them confirmed their feelings for each other.

"Huh...? But Zagan and Nephy were already a couple when I first met them. Why now?"

"Uh, this is rather difficult to explain, but the two of them likely weren't conscious of that fact. And now that they are, they're confused, right?"

"Does that kind of thing happen?" Foll inquired, looking like she didn't really understand what he was getting at. However, Raphael wasn't someone who was capable of answering that particular question, while left him at a loss for words as Foll followed up by saying, "I want something like what they have... A Zagan to my Nephy, I mean..."

"There's no need for you to rush. You'll surely meet a bastard like that one day. It'll make me feel somewhat lonely, though..." Raphael replied as he brushed her head, which made Foll cling to his leg.

"You're not alone, Raphael. I'll live a long life, so I'll be with you forever."

Those words left Raphael staring back in wonder before he eventually gave in and smiled. *Orobas. Your daughter has grown quite nicely. She reminds me of the girl I once raised...*

A Sense of Guilt

"Haven't you had enough, sir?"

After being reprimanded by the waitress, the man poured even more liquor into his glass. This man was the auctioneer who hosted the dark auction. People counted among the merchandise he sold, and even though he knew that was a sin, the man continued his work in order to make more money.

I wonder what happened to that elf... One among those products he'd sold was a most pitiful girl. The man had never even spoken to her, but he felt sorry for her nonetheless. Unfortunately, that girl was purchased by a devil of a sorcerer. He would never forget the terrifying smile that sorcerer made in the end. The auctioneer believed that he would surely go to hell for that transgression, so he was drowning his sorrows with alcohol when...

"Huh? Wuh!?"

That devil of a sorcerer and the elf sat down at a table close to him.

HUH!? What's going on? Am I hallucinating? The two of them ignored the man's shock entirely and went on to order food. The girl didn't seem used to handling a fork and was in distress at not being able to pick up a cherry tomato.

The sorcerer was watching over this on the edge of his seat, and when the girl managed to finally scoop up the tomato, he pumped his fist. Next, the sorcerer tried to consume a tomato himself, but he also failed to use his fork and entered a difficult battle of his own. And that was the moment the girl used a spoon to scoop up the tomato, then held it out to the sorcerer.

Huh? Why are these two feeding each other in broad daylight...? The two of them looked like a pair of ten-year-olds who were meeting for the first time. Frankly, it was hard to watch.

Goddammit... Don't screw with me. I've been agonizing over selling her this whole time, and this what I get? The man glared at them, and the two of them must have felt his gaze, since they looked back toward him. Their eyes met, and the sorcerer and girl turned bright red to match the food they were feeding each other. Embarrassed by the situation, they rushed off in a hurry.

"Someone remind me what a slave is...?"

The man eventually paid his bill and left. Surprisingly, the world may have been a far better place than he imagined.

A Fateful Encounter

This meeting was preordained by the world itself. Gremory was walking about town as a beautiful woman when she suddenly came to a stop in front of a certain clothing shop. Once there, she met an avian girl with green wings. She could tell at first sight that this girl was the

same as her. And so, Gremory brushed back her long hair and put on a proud smile as she began to speak.

“Which would you show more love, a dragon or an elf?”

“If you’re going to show love, then love everything equally! I’ll love them both right down to the bone!”

The two of them shared a firm handshake after she said that.

“I am Gremory. I have heard many rumors of you, Manuela. It appears my liege buys clothes from you quite often.”

“It is an honor to be recognized by the great evangelist of love power, Enchantress Gremory!”

The two of them began snickering ominously after that short exchange.

“Tell me, Miss Gremory, how are Sir Zagan and Nephry progressing?”

“I’m glad you asked! Are you aware that they confessed to each other at the hidden elven village?”

“A confession! Finally!? They were practically already married, but Sir Zagan couldn’t even say ‘I love you’ at all. I’m glad he’s finally taken a step forward!”

“Still, the followup’s been terrible. Now they’re just constantly awkward around each other. Sure, that’s a great event in its own right, but their progress has been so slow that I feel like vomiting blood.”

“Yeaah, I can already picture it. It’s like a ten year old’s first crush...” Manuela said as she looked up at the ceiling in despair. However, Gremory simply smiled like a wise sage.

“Have no fear. I have a plan. I will guide those two down the proper path and ensure they go on a date!”

“A-Are you sure you can pull that off? Can you really make those two innocent kids do something that bold...?” Manuela asked as she gulped audibly.

“I can, but soon enough, I’ll be stuck in Archdemon Palace for a while. It’s a real shame that I won’t be able to spy on their date...”

“Then, do you want me to be lovestruck... I mean, observe their date and report back to you?”

“You catch on quick. In exchange, I’ll treat you to stories of their interactions in the castle.”

This was the moment a great evil began to stir without anyone’s knowledge.



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An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride: Volume 5
by Fuminori Teshima

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